

## CREATING A PATH TO FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

*Shirley Lew*

I am currently the dean of the library at a community college. I'm a feminist and I apply feminist praxis in my role as a leader, particularly critical feminist pedagogy.

These statements are true, yet they feel false or at least portray an incomplete picture, as my path to both leadership and feminism was indirect and unplanned. Truer statements would be that I became a leader by circumstance, and that my feminist consciousness evolved over time, and came into clearer focus with each leadership role I took on. As bell hooks says, "[t]here is no one path to feminism".<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I will explore, using personal narrative, my path to feminist leadership and address some basic questions I think about every day: What does feminist leadership mean to me? How do I put into practice a feminist leadership in libraries? What does a library run on feminist principles look like?

My approach in this discussion draws upon feminist inquiry and feminist epistemology. In delving into my own story, I take encouragement from the feminist principles that "the personal transforms into the political" and "concrete lived experience is a key place from which to build knowledge and foment social change".<sup>2</sup>

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1 bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), 116.

2 Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, "Feminist Research: Exploring, Interrogating, and Transforming the Interconnections of Epistemology, Methodology, and Method" in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2012), 2.

Further, as a woman of colour practicing in a field long dominated by whiteness, I draw from Paulo Freire's writings about systems of oppression, and the critical reflection that the oppressed use to raise consciousness and inform action. Freire's call for a transformative praxis based on reflection and action is central to my practice.<sup>3</sup> This chapter is part of that process of reflection and considers how I can bring about change as a leader.

I am not a feminist scholar (I'm actively learning) but I know enough to understand the need for someone like me to speak personally, and therefore politically. Nevertheless, the self-doubt remains as I worry whether I have anything useful to say. There is anxiety as well, about taking up space and time with what feels like navel-gazing. Erin Wunker describes my feelings perfectly when she says, in the introduction to *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy*, "Who do I think I am?" Wunker describes the crisis she felt writing in the first person, and how vulnerable she felt using the pronoun "I", a response she intellectually understood is rooted in patriarchal ideas of the "I" connoting the confessional, or a feminized type of writing.<sup>4</sup> She concludes:

[T]he personal pronoun *I* is crucial; it's a site from which we can take stock, take responsibility, and take space if space is needed... Situating yourself enacts the deliberate practice of locating your own identity and experiences as coming from somewhere and being mediated by certain things such as your race, gender, and class. Laying these things out for yourself locates your way of being in the world—your knowledge—within larger systems of knowing.<sup>5</sup>

Her declaration is true and it's helpful. It's also helpful for me to view the writing of this essay as taking steps "from the margin to the center" as bell hooks urges us to do, despite how uncomfortable it is to move away from the familiar. The writing feels risky, but necessary, as Wunker says, to situate myself as a library leader.

In terms of locating my identity, I offer a few facts about myself. I'm a cisgender, heterosexual, first-generation Chinese-Canadian. I

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3 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum International, 2001), 14.

4 Erin Wunker, *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy: Essays on Everyday Life* (Toronto: BookThug, 2016), 11.

5 Ibid., 30-31.

am not fluent in speaking or reading Chinese, although I look as if I should be, which has caused problems. In language and culture I relate more strongly with western society, although it's my Chinese roots that have most sharply and, at times, painfully defined my identity and sense of (non)belonging. The ways in which I am privileged are many. I'm presently in a named position of power that gives me the space to be transparent and vulnerable, with low risk. I have job security, benefits, and a salary well above average. I am able bodied and neuronormative. I am well loved and supported by my partner, my friends, and my family.

There are aspects of my identity and present reality that aren't as neatly described and are perhaps best understood as oppositional. I know what systemic racism, injustice, intolerance, and invisibility feel like, and I am also at the center of a post-secondary system that has traditionally oppressed those with less power. I come from a family and a culture characterized by quiet acceptance, even when confronted with hate, and yet I am in a position in my work and community that requires that I speak out loudly and often, and act decisively. Growing up, I so internalized my marginalization, that what caught my imagination wasn't the stories of the Chinese people in Canada, but rather the white stories I found in novels and history books. These white stories seemed to me to hold the key to understanding and accessing the "real" world, whereas the actual world I was in felt unreal or not important. Most difficult to admit was the extent to which I rejected the language and culture of my family. In an act of self-marginalization, as early as five years old I refused to speak the rural Chinese dialect of my parents. At five, I was exposed to school, and the experience confirmed what I had already intuited: the language of my home life was best kept hidden indoors as it had no value or currency in the outside world. There were clear signs that even the dialect we spoke exposed us and made us vulnerable. When receiving guests or interacting with anyone in a public sphere, my parents switched from Toisanese, a dialect of Chinese hillbillies, to Cantonese, a dialect of urbane Hong Kong. The double whammy of the wrong language and the wrong dialect explained the barriers to opportunity that I could see my parents struggling against, and by extension, the difficulty they had in extending opportunities to their children. To this day, I can't speak any dialect of Chinese, and rejecting the language had, at the time, the desired effect of

providing a type of entry into the dominant society. Even as I can reflect on, and understand, the multi-layered reasons for my self-oppression as a young child, the emotions it conjures—anger, shame, powerlessness—are raw. These conflicting elements are very active components of my identity and inform the way I understand myself in my current role. I know that I never want to experience that level of shame or powerlessness again, and that these emotions, regardless of how neatly compartmentalized and deeply buried, are fundamental to who I am. Similarly, my sensitivity to power and oppression, and how they are embedded in systems of language and culture, is finely tuned from these life experiences. I share these details not because I think they're particularly unusual, but because it's important to provide a context for a feminist leadership coming from a place of intersectional marginalization. I know I bring a different and much-needed perspective on what social justice, equity, and inclusion can be like for students and staff at a public educational institution. At the same time, I also know that my underlying emotions can be easily triggered and cause a gut reaction to issues, as opposed to one that creates a better chance for real change. The emotional is personal is political.

In discussing my path to becoming a library leader, and my feelings about having this role in this community, it's relevant to mention how I got my first professional position as a librarian. Fresh out of library school in 1999, I was offered a full-time position in a web and technology role, areas I intentionally focused on in school and had a strong interest in. A week into my new job, it became evident that a key reason I was offered the position was because I was mistaken for the other Asian woman in my graduating class (there were only two of us), the other woman having made a strong impression on my boss in a course in which my boss was lecturing. I never took that course. The Other Asian Woman had a completely different set of skills and professional interests than I did. It need not be said, but it needs to be said: we did not look anything alike. The instructive element in this introduction to the library profession was not suddenly realizing that clumsy racism exists even in libraries, but that in the awkward moment when the two of us realized the mistaken identity, I immediately made light of it and labored to rectify the situation for my boss' sake. The retreat into silence and quiet acceptance is a hard habit to shake. These moments have played out repeatedly over the seventeen years I

have been a librarian, the most recent occurring at my workplace after I had become the library director. Again, I was mistaken for the Other Asian Woman in a room of academic leaders where there were only two of us present. Being reminded of your invisibility is a powerful force of oppression and persists even with the right credentials or a named position of power.

After that first professional job, the positions I held were not a linear progression up a career ladder. It was more of a meander, taking opportunities as they arose, pursuing side projects that advanced issues or outcomes I believed in, seeking ways to work with people I respected inside and outside my organization. I was constructing my own professional sphere and community, one that made sense to me and one in which I felt I belonged, even if that sense of belonging was in a community of my own making and not recognized or sanctioned by the mainstream profession. I was in the system, doing rewarding and productive work, yet never quite shedding that cloak of invisibility. Why risk the embarrassment of assuming others saw me, when they didn't? In reality, many library people did see me, and encouraged and supported me, but trapped in the psychological space of feeling dominated, I felt their approval was not only unearned but also unreliable. From operating in this mode and mindset for many years, to then becoming a Director, then Dean, of the library was certainly not planned. A temporary acting appointment became permanent, and was then expanded, all in a period of sixteen months. While I went into these positions fully aware of their requirements and didn't question my ability to do them, the emotional transition to fully embodying leadership was a longer journey. To practice leadership with honesty and authenticity, I had to discard the cloak of invisibility. However, rather than feeling seen, I felt utterly exposed, and I was not prepared for it.

Unpacking that feeling of exposure at the very moment the establishment had validated me and handed me significant power created a small crisis. Freire provides some insight:

The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom... without freedom, [the oppressed] cannot exist authentically... They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor

within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and recreate, in their power to transform the world.<sup>6</sup>

Leaving aside Freire's dated and problematic implication that the oppressed and oppressors are all male, his words nevertheless came as a surprise. I thought I was self-aware and had done the work of understanding the impact of racism and marginalization. But Freire's call to exist authentically through the act of freeing oneself from oppressive systems hit me at the right time, and allowed me to really see and to feel the full weight of the oppression that I had willingly dragged along with me my entire life. I still had baggage, and this was a problem if I was going to be the kind of feminist leader I wanted to be. How could I ensure everyone in my library had a voice if I continued to silence myself? How could I advocate for real change in any context if I moved through the world being invisible when it suited me or when it was a convenient escape? Did I even know how to assert my presence without apology and without concerning myself with others' discomfort? Could I deal with other people's disappointment when they realize who I am, and not the person they thought or wished I was?

This baggage stemmed from my relationship with power and an uncomfortable history of acquiescing to it, giving it away like a hot potato whenever it was handed to me, and basically treating it as undesirable. To me, power was the force that oppressed and I was much more comfortable on the other side of it, resisting and working around it. I wasn't used to thinking about power in a context that wasn't negatively framed by patriarchy and colonialism and by inequity and injustice. I hadn't tried to imagine power in a feminist framework because I never got past the issue of whether feminism and institutional power were inherently contradictory systems. However, the day-to-day reality of my job brought me down to earth quickly. I had to reconcile my relationship with power if I was to achieve the freedom that Freire describes. I needed to be authentically and wholly myself if I was going to be a leader who was transparent, inclusive,

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<sup>6</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 47-48.

grounded in my values, and able to create the kind of safe environment I wanted for staff and students in the library. I also had to address the fact that practicing feminist leadership within a traditional institution was in some ways incongruent, and navigating those tensions would require an even greater level of transparency and also compromise.

The feeling of exposure I felt when placed in a leadership role begins to make more sense in the context of a lifetime of existing in the margins and having no apparatus to lean upon when placed at the center. This role challenged my unresolved issues with oppression and, even more problematic, with my self-oppression through self-censoring of language, culture, and my own voice at the very moments I needed to speak up. This realization was the necessary starting point for constructing a way toward a feminist leadership that could really enact change. I needed to accept and validate my experience as something real, and therefore common, and to start talking about it openly with those in my community and especially with other librarians of color. I needed to figure out how to use my experience to become better attuned to the ways in which our profession and workplaces continue to oppress, and yet not center these issues on me, and on my emotional triggers. I needed an apparatus, and visualizing what this might look like was key to a way forward. I imagined a physical support structure that was both an extension of me, yet separate. I envisioned a personal feminist framework that conformed to the shape of my body and experience, an exoskeleton of sorts, which acted as a filter for things coming in and going out. I visualize the framework as multilayered, at its foundation a perspective constructed from personal experience, and interwoven with the many books, feminist theories, and people in my community—friends, mentors, colleagues—who shape my thinking and values. The framework isn't static but rather it expands, contracts, and changes shape with time and experience. Visualizing this personal feminist framework works for me and is a way of carrying my community with me. It gives me a space to think objectively through a feminist lens, to add to and build upon theory and ideas, to learn and unlearn things as I encounter new situations. It's a filter through which I can separate the self from what's required in the moment, holding me accountable before I veer along the wrong path.

How does this framework operate in practice? On a day-to-day basis, it underlies everything from dealing with difficult emails, to

writing policy, to navigating the power dynamics and politics in a meeting. For example, it helps me respond effectively to a group email thread where no consensus is being reached and discussion has stalled. The reflexive response is to intervene with an email suggesting a way forward and a possible solution. However, considered through a feminist lens, intervening in this way raises immediate questions. Is “suggesting a way forward” just a euphemistic way of stating what is really happening: I am using my position of power to impose a solution and thus quickly resolve the issue to the satisfaction (usually) of the most vocal among the group. The feminist framework encourages me to ask what is being overlooked in the name of convenience and efficiency. Whose views were once again in the minority or who had not spoken up at all? Is there a pattern of dominant voices overriding others under the guise of collaborative decision-making that needs to be called out? The right response is rarely the easy response, one that requires the deeper work necessary to truly address issues. Where the feminist framework is most required is in these moments of failure. It keeps me aware of when I am taking the shortcut and reminds me that deeper issues ultimately cannot be ignored.

On a more macro-level, a feminist framework helps make sense of issues in the profession as a whole and in the academic library community specifically. At this level the issues are many: inaction regarding the lack of meaningful diversity in libraries; the need to engage with online privacy and surveillance issues, technically and politically; passive acceptance of licensing terms and exorbitant fees charged by academic publishers and content aggregators; allocation of our limited budgets to for-profit library software vendors despite reduction of choice and increasing costs; inability to reach a critical mass of support for open access and open source software which would allow us to collectively take control of our information and automation, and have these systems accessible by all institutions. On the surface, it's easy to point to the hypocrisy of our profession when it comes to declaring our values versus what we actually do. We espouse diversity but the profession remains overwhelmingly white. We purport to care about privacy and stewardship of our data, yet we turn our information over to closed proprietary systems, thereby forfeiting control without fully understanding the technology behind it. We fight for intellectual freedom, yet we allow our collections to shrink in scope and depth in order to purchase content from the same

major academic publishers who dominate the market. We decry the profit-driven motives of software vendors, yet we continue to give them our business. We're unified in our support for equal access and level playing fields, yet the reality is a growing divide between big and small institutions due to divergent levels of commitment to consortial and cooperative approaches to technology and content. Of course, it's not as simple as hypocrisy—there are financial and political pressures that impact decisions made by all libraries. But viewed from a feminist perspective, the decision-making process as a whole is one fraught with issues of power, and driven by a culture and system that protects the status quo. We are less than forthright about these boundaries and hierarchies we have established in the library world based on sector, institution type, size, and urban versus rural geographic divisions: there are the systems at the center and the systems in the margin and a culture that maintains this order. It's a culture that designates power to a select few who set our priorities, who define what is acceptable practice, and who manage away voices of dissent or alternative approaches.

What is the feminist leadership response in this larger context? The feminist framework can provide perspective and help us recognize how even well-meaning organizations such as libraries can still create systems of oppression that marginalize, exclude, and consolidate power. The collective response from the library community has been largely silence. Drawing upon my experience of self-oppression, I find it unsettling to recognize the extent to which our female-dominant profession is actually patriarchal. bell hooks' observation that most women, and white feminists specifically, "have not decolonized their thinking"<sup>7</sup> feels relevant. She goes on to say:

Since unenlightened white feminists were unwilling to acknowledge the spheres of American life where they acted and act in collusion with imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, sustained protest and resistance on the part of black women / women of color and our radical white sisters was needed to break the wall of denial.<sup>8</sup>

The paradox of feminists who collude with the patriarchy is like the paradox of librarians who enable systems of inaccessibility and

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<sup>7</sup> hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*, 45.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 46.

inequity. What is the feminist leadership response? How do we break the wall of denial? I return to Freire's theory of transformation through critical reflection and action. In many ways, we are doing the work of critical reflection and action with initiatives like the #critlib discussions taking place in Twitter, code of conduct policies at our conferences, increasing awareness of who we ask to speak to our communities as keynotes and panelists, and a growing body of writing about resistance within libraries.<sup>9</sup> A feminist leadership response expands these discussions to decision-making tables and does not remain silent. It starts by asking the questions that aren't being asked, raising issues that aren't part of the usual discourse, and suggesting changes to our processes to make them more inclusive and transparent. Feminism demands that we ask the questions and make the changes to ensure we are doing the things we say we are doing.

Described in this way, feminist leadership sounds bold, fearless, and uncompromising. And in many ways it is: feminist leadership forces the organization to slow down, to take the harder route, and to work for outcomes that may not be measurable within a timeframe that advances the short-term goals of organizations or careers. However, in those moments when there is an opportunity to enact change, what I still think about first is whether it is safe to speak up. I'm looking for my allies. I'm assessing the faces of those who have the most power in the room and I'm gauging the level of receptiveness. I may speak or just as likely I may decide to say nothing at all and wait. When I think about what a library run on feminist principles looks like, it's important that it look and feel different than it currently does. There don't have to be personal consequences for offering a different perspective or way of doing things. We can strive for a culture that says of itself: we have the resilience and capacity to take in and consider new ideas and to recognize when it is time to make bold changes. It is possible to create a safe environment for library workers and students to talk with one another about their concerns and needs without fear

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<sup>9</sup> For example, books published by Library Juice Press; open access journals *In the Library With a Lead Pipe* and *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*; the blogs and writings of April Hathcock (<https://aprilhathcock.wordpress.com/>), Chris Bourg (<https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/>), Emily Drabinski (<http://www.emilydrabinski.com/>), and Jennifer Vinopal (<http://vinopal.org/>), to name a few.

of reprisal or rejection. To create that safe culture, we need to address diversity in concrete terms, supported by inclusive policies, procedures, and practices. In the larger context, we need to be more honest about the real challenges facing libraries, and our relevance in the communities we serve. We need to change the way we make collective decisions such that community-supported solutions are the default, benefiting everyone not just now but also for the long term. To a greater degree, feminist-led libraries can do the work that reflects the values we hold.

The feminist framework, then, is integral to my leadership practice and is the filter through which I critically self-reflect and determine the “right thing to do”, both on a day-to-day basis and when considering the larger issues that face librarianship. While my framework continues to grow and evolve the more I read and learn from others, at its core is the truthfulness of my lived experience which remains my most trusted point of reference. Accepting the lived experience as valid and relevant to my practice is essential and provides the stable foundation for building a framework that can stand on its own. In this chapter, I’ve attempted to reflect on my path to feminism and library leadership and have found parallels in my personal experience and in the issues I see confronting librarianship. Silence characterized my way of survival, and internalizing patriarchal marginalization was my mode of being. The same silence and internalizing of oppressive systems is evident in the library profession. In both, there is a conflict and dissonance between behavior and our sense of identity, and in both the disconnect has, I would argue, led to crisis. For me, the crisis came at the moment of becoming the director of the library, and having to decide whether I was going to lead from a place of oppression or from a place of transparency and authenticity. For the library community, the crisis hinges on the question of whether we can answer, with honesty, who it is we are working for—the interests of the establishment (institutions or individuals) or the betterment of the greater good now and in the future. I hope this exploration contributes to an evolving environment in which we have more discussions about our varied experiences, and to valuing the different perspectives our individual experiences bring to librarianship. I’d like to hear us talk about how different ways of practicing librarianship can sustain all

of us, and have this reflected back to the communities we serve. I'm inspired by the words of Toni Morrison:

I tell my students, 'When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game.'<sup>10</sup>

The real job of a feminist leader is simple: free yourself in order to free and empower others; free our libraries in order to empower those we serve. I know I am not alone in wanting this to be the kind of librarianship I wish to practice and be part of.

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<sup>10</sup> Toni Morrison, interview by Pam Houston, "The Truest Eye," *O, The Oprah Magazine*, November 2003, 212.

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