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Review of Feminists Among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership

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The edited volume Feminists among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership sets out to describe the practices of feminist library leaders, as well as to interrogate why library leadership in the United States and Canada is not more explicitly feminist. In doing so, contributors describe their own practices, investigate and interrogate the practices of others, and seek to evaluate systemic forces that get in the way of more explicitly feminist leadership in libraries. The volume succeeds in articulating and employing an expansive definition of feminism and feminist leadership but does not go as far toward articulating a reason feminist leadership might be especially appropriate or well-situated within the library profession.

“Feminism” is a slippery word, one that can wound even as it seeks to define a liberatory stance. Its use and assumed meaning (as a mechanism for white, middle-class women to achieve greater economic opportunity) in the United States and Canada in the past fifty years has often functioned to exclude women of color (and, more recently, trans* women). The editors of Feminists among Us are explicit in their definition and understanding of the term, and a majority of the contributors ground their own understanding of feminism in the work of intersectional feminist theorists. The volume’s foreword, by Safiya Umoja Noble, invokes Angela Davis’s assertion that “feminism involves so much more than gender equality and it involves so much more than gender” (vii). bell hooks, and specifically her book Feminism Is for Everybody, is named as a guiding intellectual force by more than one chapter author. It is thrilling to read a book that demands and assumes feminism to include an analysis of race, class, ability, and other systemic oppressions within capitalist society.

What kinds of feminist stances are described as being important for leaders to enact? Across the chapters, several emerge: collective decision-making, inclusive vision, designing inclusive processes, transparency, care, and advocacy.

The editors mention attitudes among their colleagues that feminist ideals are incompatible with leadership in a neoliberal institution (most contributors work in academic library settings). Indeed, the editors articulate the creation of this book as a way to combat those ideas and convince more professionals who hold feminist political stances that it is possible to operate in a library leadership position while remaining true to goals of equity and inclusion. The volume absolutely succeeds in offering a variety of ways current leaders have navigated their careers in libraries while maintaining clearly articulated feminist values.

The strongest chapters in the volume are those where authors describe what makes their own leadership choices explicitly feminist or ask others to describe their feminist leadership. The first
two chapters, “Always a Novice: Feminist Learning and Leadership Practice” by Maura A. Smale and “Creating a Path to Feminist Leadership” by Shirley Lew, are similar in that both authors describe an almost accidental path to leadership and a need to educate themselves in feminist theory along the way in order to better envision how they could lead with authenticity. Both authors position themselves as continuous learners, are transparent about mistakes, and take risks by being frank about what they still have to learn. The chapters themselves show the authors engaged in a feminist process of care, both for themselves and for their colleagues, as they seek out a deeper understanding of feminist ideas and practices in order to be more inclusive leaders.

The final two chapters, “Feminist Praxis in Library Leadership” by April M. Hathcock and Jennifer Vinopal and “A Feminist among Us: An Interview with Chris Bourg” by Tara Robertson, allow the voices of a number of different feminist leaders to emerge. Hathcock and Vinopal present quotations from multiple voices (anonymously) in answer to the same question, an inclusive strategy that highlights and values a diversity of viewpoints and practices. Robertson’s in-depth interview with Bourg allows space for Bourg to highlight specific stances and practices and to articulate open questions about her own leadership style. Bourg also explicitly focuses on what she feels she can and cannot do in her current role as the library director of a large research library. Her focus on positionality and how it shapes leadership opportunities and styles is illuminating.

The praxis-focused articulations in these four chapters manage to be both practical and radical, in the sense that they open possibilities of imagination. They should be required reading for all new managers or leaders in the library and archival professions, as well as for anyone curious about putting feminist theories into practice.

Hathcock and Vinopal’s excellent chapter attempts to begin with a literature review, but the authors find little research on feminist leadership in the library profession, and not much more in other fields. It is possible that some of this vacuum is created by inexact terminology. What does a leadership style based on antiracism, radical empathy, inclusiveness, and attention to community needs look like? What would we call it? In this volume, it is named feminism.

The volume documents an existing community of practice and provides readers with exciting ideas to populate their own feminist leadership imaginary. However, readers may not entirely be able to imagine how to enact those feminist ideals in a library setting. Feminists among Us is less successful in addressing inherent tensions between the values listed above and those valued in many libraries and academic institutions, particularly from individuals elevated to leadership roles.
A tension throughout the volume is the perceived “specialness” of the library and information professions as they relate to social justice, feminist theories, and transformative change. The past decade has seen librarians and archivists seek to articulate a more explicit focus on social justice as a professional value, along with a good deal of pushback from other professionals, as well as painful and explicit reminders that the humans who do this work are bound up in the same racial, class, gender, and political categories as other citizens.¹ A library degree does not confer an interest in or dedication to social justice, just as lived experience of gender oppression does not result in a feminist political stance.

Editor Baharak Yousefi’s chapter, “On the Disparity between What We Say and What We Do in Libraries,” goes the furthest in investigating what actual interventions feminist leadership could make within existing library ideologies. Yousefi describes an incident in which the library in which she works refused to take part in sponsoring a discussion among citizens involving a dispute around public shaming of a queer feminist activist. Yousefi uses theorist Keller Easterling’s idea of “infrastructure space” to investigate ways she (and other feminist librarians) could resist and make headway into changing the neoliberal ideas of library neutrality. This is a fascinating theoretical investigation and extremely helpful in envisioning active political stances and responses within restrictive neoliberal paradigms.

Hathcock and Vinopal conclude their chapter with a call for more research: “Research is needed on the ways power is distributed, both formally and informally, in libraries, as well as the ways the profession relies on and benefits from structural racism in our society. . . . Almost everything in librarianship would benefit from more intersectional feminist analysis” (169). May this call spur more research, analysis, and possibly another edited volume on how feminist practices and leadership, described so well by the contributors to Feminists among Us, can better exist within and transform existing library hierarchies and structures.

¹ The outrageous racist treatment of April Hathcock by other members of the American Library Association Council in January 2019 is the most recent public example of this reality.