

A FEMINIST AMONG US: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS BOURG

Tara Robertson

I'm a big fan of Chris Bourg. I'm inspired by her commitment to social justice, diversity, and feminism. I appreciate the theoretical models she proposes and the concrete ideas she has for making change with a queer feminist agenda. She uses conference keynote invitations as an opportunity to present with and signal boost other opinionated librarians, especially people of color. She embodies the feminist phrase "the personal is political" by being open and vulnerable about parts of her personal life that inform her work.

Currently Chris is the Director of Libraries at MIT. She was the Associate University Librarian for Public Services at Stanford, served as a Battalion Staff Officer in the US Army, and taught at the US Military Academy at West Point. Her influence goes beyond her formal positions. She is very involved in the profession as a keynote speaker at library conferences, the Vice Chair of the Association of Research Libraries' Diversity and Inclusion Committee, and an active contributor on social media.

For someone with her experience and credentials, Chris' humility and openness is refreshing. She posts most of her talks on her website shortly after delivering them, making them accessible to everyone. Chris is one of the few library directors who is active on Twitter engaging with people who work at all levels of libraries.

She is a white woman who talks about systemic racism. She accepts that part of her work is to be patient with other white people who are just starting to see how white supremacy operates in institutions

like libraries. Chris' work creates more space for me, a queer, mixed race librarian, to be excited about libraries and social justice, and to imagine and map out a career path in senior management.

Chris and I initially connected on Twitter, and I first met her in person at the Digital Library Federation (DLF) Forum in 2015 in Vancouver. This interview took place over Skype in September 2016.

It was a delight and pleasure to interview her for this book.

Tara Robertson: How would you define feminist leadership?

Chris Bourg: That's a great question. I'm almost hesitant to define it. For me one of the key tenets of feminism is the ability to self-identify. I wouldn't want to define leadership for any other feminist. I can tell you that to bring a feminist perspective to my role as a leader involves both some very commonplace, operational aspects and some more theoretical aspects for me.

As an intersectional feminist I try and lead from a perspective of trying to create an organization where people feel comfortable and welcome as their whole authentic selves, to the extent that they want to bring that to work. For me it's a really important way of looking at the workforce. To be honest—and this may sound kind of strange—some of this approach comes out of being in the Army for 10 years. It may seem counterintuitive, but the Army really is a near-total institution where your work and family life are intertwined. Your whole person belongs to the Army. This plays out in all kinds of bad ways, but also in these good ways, where the good leaders really take care of you as a whole person. It's more paternalistic than I am as a library director but that way of thinking about people as whole people, who have lives outside of their job description, is a healthy one. And accepting that people's external lives are not a distraction is just necessary. To ignore this is to ignore part of reality.

Feminism has to do with transparency, agency, and choice. I think about choice as a guiding principle. I want to maximize choice for people—within every decision, in every policy, and in the ways that we do things in this organization. Transparency is also a guiding principle. So much of leadership is about communication. At the leadership level, we often make a decision and then ask the question, "Who should we share this with?"

I want the question to be, “Why shouldn’t we share this with everyone?” I want the default to be share with everyone, as soon as possible. If necessary, it’s possible to whittle back from there. But if we start with that as the default I think we become more transparent.

Black feminists and feminists of color from the 90s, like bell hooks, Audrey Lorde, Cherríe Moraga and Patricia Hill Collins, inform the way I think about inclusion. It’s the practice of looking around the table and literally asking, “Who’s missing?” and “How can we more inclusive?” It’s also about getting the next level of leadership to ask the same question, and have that spread throughout the organization.

I remember that in your conversation with Lareese Hall¹ at the Association of College and University Libraries, Greater New York Metropolitan Chapter (ACRL/NY) Symposium, you spoke about asking who’s missing in terms of staffing, collections and services.² You also talked about how Bethany Nowviskie³ articulated an ethics of care and caring. You connected this ethics of care and caring to the kind of leadership that you learned from the Army.

When I interviewed for this job I was asked “How does running a library differ from being a leader in the Army?” One of the things that happens in the Army is when you take command of a unit you become legally responsible for the health, welfare, and morale of the troops under your command. If you bring that perspective to leadership you have to care about the person and you have to adopt an ethic of caring.

1 At the time of ACRL/NY symposium, Lareese Hall was the Architecture and Art Librarian at MIT. At the time of this interview, she is Dean of Libraries at the Rhode Island School of Design.

2 Chris Bourg, “The Radicalism Is Coming from Inside the Library,” *Feral Librarian* (blog), December 10, 2015, <https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2015/12/10/the-radicalism-is-coming-from-inside-the-library/>.

3 At the time of this interview, Bethany Nowviskie is the Director of the DLF, at Council on Library and Information Resources and Research Associate Professor of Digital Humanities in the Department of English at the University of Virginia.

It sounds counterintuitive when people think about the Army, until you start to sort of think about the way that in this very sort of male-centric, patriarchal, paternalistic way men talk about their experience in the Army. They talk about being in a band of brothers or about loving their brothers. There is this ethic of love and family that happens there. I like to think that you can take what's good about that and bring it into a more diverse and more progressive culture. At least that's what I'm trying to do.

So how does feminist leadership differ from regular or non-feminist or default style of leadership?

That's a hard question for me, because I don't know how to define the default. In the conversation with Lareese Hall that you mentioned just now, I talked about feminist leadership, and said that other people might call it humanist leadership or progressive leadership and that's OK with me.⁴ For me, feminist leadership comes from my grounding in feminist reading and being familiar with and involved in feminist circles.

I think the difference is primarily around priorities, meaning whether you see certain aspects—caring about the whole person, inclusion, agency and paying attention to who's not there—as nice extras or as central to the work. To me, they're central to the work.

I suspect that on some spectrum of feminist to not-feminist leadership, on the far end of the not-feminist spectrum of leadership are those who think that leadership is a neutral endeavor and that a good leader just does what's best for the organization and you accomplish your goals. An anti-feminist or non-feminist style of leadership might assert that feminism has nothing to do with leadership and that leading is neutral. A big tenet of feminist thought is that there is no such thing as neutrality—everyone comes with an agenda. As a feminist, I know that to lead in a way that doesn't pay attention to who's not there, to lead in a way that asserts everything is a meritocracy, or that says I'm not going to worry about the whole person because leading is just about getting the work done—leading in any of these ways is

⁴ Chris Bourg. "Radicalism."

an agenda. Feminist leadership recognizes that all leadership is agenda-driven and is honest about that.

That honesty is really refreshing. There’s a post on your blog where you reflect on being explicit about having a queer, feminist agenda.⁵

It’s so true. I can’t tell you the number of times I give various versions of a talk, and someone says, “Aren’t you worried that there may be people in your organization who don’t agree with your agenda?” I respond, “Why are you only asking me that?” Many people don’t proclaim their agendas, but definitely have agendas, even if they are agendas about maintaining the status quo, and never get asked about how they handle people in their organization who don’t agree with their agendas.

Can you pinpoint the time in your career where you became a feminist leader, or was it more of a process?

It’s a little of both. I think it definitely was a process but I can pinpoint a time when I became significantly more self-aware that I was leading in that way and that I wanted to and was going to be honest and intentional about it. It had to do with starting to spend some time getting to know some of the women who were working in the library technologies department at Stanford, specifically Bess Sadler.

When Bess came to Stanford and as we got to know each other there was a moment where she was talking to me about the issues facing women in tech. I remember asking “How can I help?” She said conference codes of conduct would really be helpful.

So I had this experience of talking to Bess and other women in the Stanford libraries, and in other libraries, who were willing to be honest about some of the discrimination and sexism and microaggressions that they faced, even in this predominantly female, supposedly liberal profession. And those women, especially Bess, helped me to see the differences, large and small,

⁵ Chris Bourg, “Agendas: Everyone Has One,” *Feral Librarian* (blog), August 25, 2013, <https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2013/08/25/agendas-everyone-has-one/>.

that someone in a leadership position could make if they were willing to pay attention to the gender issues.

When I started working with Bess on the paper that we did on feminism and library discovery⁶, it really sent me back to some of the feminist literature I had read in the mid 90s, mostly the intersectional feminists of color I mentioned earlier. Re-reading their work got me thinking, “How can I apply these ideas to my life and my role in libraries right now?” It helped me see that so many of the conversations about gender in libraries and in library technology are really mostly about white women, and that we need to be more intentional about thinking about race, sexuality, and other intersecting identities.

I’ve got to give Bess Sadler a lot of credit. I like to believe that I was being a feminist leader before that, but I wasn’t self-conscious about it and intentional about it until those conversations with Bess.

You’re an out butch queer woman who’s got a very dapper style. I love that you frame these conversation by asking about gender. You’re not just asking, “Where are the women?” which often means, “Where are the white women?” You’re bringing more complexity to the discussion and I really appreciate that.

It’s interesting that you bring that up because one of the first public presentations I gave on gender was a panel on women in library technology. Most of the rest of the panel was straight white women. These straight white women all talked about the problem of being called Mrs., or being asked when they’ll get married, or being asked about their kids. They presented these issues as being universal problems for all women. As a butch woman, people don’t actually believe I have a daughter, so that’s not one of the problems that I face, and I’m never called Mrs. in person, and no one asks me when I’m getting married. That is not the experience of all women.

I have to own the fact that being masculine-presenting gives me some advantages in individual interactions. I can be a feminist.

⁶ Bess Sadler and Chris Bourg, “Feminism and the Future of Library Discovery,” *code4lib Journal* 28 (2015), <http://journal.code4lib.org/articles/10425>.

I can talk about and care about “soft” issues without appearing soft, in a way that traditionally feminine-looking women can’t. People know that I have an Army background and expect me to be tough and angry, and to be a certain kind of leader. And because of that and my masculine appearance, I can be more caring and more maternal and I don’t get penalized for it in the way that more feminine-looking women, especially white women, do. In fact, I get a lot of credit for it in a way that sometimes men do when they are caring or soft. It’s very interesting the ways that these intersections play out.

On your website you have a page stating that your pronouns are she/her/hers⁷. Were you one of the people in libraries who started the practice of putting pronouns in email signatures? That’s a small thing but it’s also sort of a big thing.

I wish I could take credit for that, but that started with the MIT Libraries Committee on Diversity and Inclusion. They held a workshop for the libraries on how to be a trans ally and this was one of the recommendations. They challenged the library staff to add their pronouns to their email block for 30 days. They talked with me beforehand and I let them know that I’d chime in quickly with my support. Having me, the Director, participate meant that lots of other people did it too. Very few people have changed it back. I will also say that I have gotten questions about it from other Association of Research Libraries (ARL) directors asking about “what’s this she/her/hers in your email block?” so it’s a great teachable moment. It’s really powerful.

You’ve also written about the challenges in being part of the senior administrative team without being co-opted by the institution. How do you resist being co-opted?

I’m learning that. I haven’t figured out the answer yet.

I think somewhere in there is the question, “How do you find allies?” Those questions are very related to me. I have to be completely honest that here at MIT I’m still working on both of

⁷ Chris Bourg, “About Chris,” last modified July 23, 2013, accessed November 15, 2016 <https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/about/>.

those things. I'm trying to find allies. Because I do think that not being co-opted by the neoliberal impulses of the institution and the bureaucracy is easier if you have allies. Everything is just easier to do when you have allies.

I don't have any peers here. As a library director I am the only library director on my campus. I have peers, rank-wise, but those people have very different jobs from me. The school deans are all doing the same job as each other, just in different disciplines—but in a general way they face a similar set of challenges. But nobody else is running a library on this campus. I think that's hard for anyone in this position. It's meant I've tried to find some of those allies amongst my peers who are fellow library directors. I also rely on my Twitter friends, who are doing library work but generally aren't in leadership positions. When I say "rely on them," I mean I need mirrors. Part of what allies do is they'll tell you when you're being co-opted. I had that at Stanford, to some extent. I'm trying to find that again at MIT. Those relationships are intense and take time to develop. That level of trust doesn't form immediately. Theoretically that's what it would take for me to have a good ally who would hold that mirror up to me.

When I first got here I was trying to say no to a lot of things so that I could really concentrate on learning this job. The things that I did agree to do were the ARL Diversity and Inclusion Committee and a taskforce here at MIT on diversity and inclusion. I have met people on this campus and throughout the ARL who are also committed to this kind of work, which has helped me start to make those relationships, to again have those allies who will hold the mirror up for me.

I have spent so much time in these elite institutions. My whole career has been either in the Army, as a grad student at Stanford, working at Stanford, or working at MIT. I still struggle with the culture of elite institutions, sometimes, but it means that I have had to learn that culture and how to succeed in it. I've learned the language and how the politics work. Ironically, and maybe this is counterintuitive, but for me part of learning how not to get caught by that culture is to flip it and co-opt the bureaucracy for my agenda. At MIT, and I think in other schools throughout the U.S., right now, it's a prime time to be able to do that.

Last fall, with the student protests about race relations at Yale and in Missouri and other places, somehow higher ed was mostly ready to take those issues seriously. They didn't do a great job, but they're not ignoring the problems. They're at least paying lip service, and there are ways to co-opt that lip service for a progressive agenda.

When you were talking about allies it sounded to me like you were talking about community or your people, the people with whom there's trust. You said that it would take time to build that. You began your job at MIT in February 2015, less than 2 years ago. What was it like to uproot and move to a new city at this stage in your career?

Moving at age 50 has been really hard. Making new friends when you're 50 years old is hard!

Social media is huge for me. The people I've been able to meet on social media are my people, my community. In many cases, people I've never met in person and in some cases people I've had the pleasure of meeting at some point. I do feel like there's a whole set of people I know on social media who have my back. But then there are times when I'm trying to get something done, as a library director, and I'm trying to inject that feminist agenda, the diversity and inclusion angle, and I would love to have some advice, but that's not the kind of thing I can tweet out.

I've noticed on social media you've been talking about self-care, exercise and having a good work/life balance. Is taking care of yourself part of a strategy of not being co-opted?

I hadn't thought of it that way but I think it absolutely is, especially being public about it.

There's vulnerability there!

There's vulnerability there in several ways. At MIT, and a little bit at Stanford too, there is this status that you get from being very, very busy and working lots and lots of hours—pulling all-nighters. I suspect that some of my administrative peers at MIT have probably pulled an all-nighter or two. They certainly work

ridiculous hours. Being willing to admit that I went on vacation and I didn't check e-mail, and didn't take your call, is a little bit risky. You run the risk of being seen as not as committed. Again, I think that I have a lot of advantages that I'm able to take that risk. I feel pretty secure in my job here. Even if I didn't, I've got a CV that looks pretty good. I don't say that in a cocky way, I've had a lot of privilege and advantage.

There are two parts to the issue of self-care. I absolutely need to do the self-care. I went from playing racquetball twice a week and doing a fair amount of walking and hiking when I was at Stanford to nothing since I got to MIT. In my first year in this job, I went from a pretty active lifestyle to almost completely sedentary. I felt it—in my body and my soul. I finally said “enough is enough” and started being more active. I had to convince myself to start small, because I wanted to get all the way back to racquetball shape in one day.

I guess I was paying attention to some of the staff who work for me who are good at self-care. I learn so much from people with whom I have the privilege of working. I can admire someone for only so long before I realize that if I'm admiring the way they're doing something maybe I could do that thing myself. I bought a Fitbit and I started walking and it's made a big difference.

It goes back again to “What is feminist leadership?” and wanting people to feel welcome as whole people. That includes being supportive of people caring for their whole person, however they need to do that. Being super public about my agenda and who I am means that people keep me accountable. My administrative assistant says, “You say you care about work-life balance, so go home. You have to model it for the rest of us.” I needed to model that and I hadn't been doing such a great job of it.

You're a leader within your organization but also within the library community as a whole. Do you operate differently within your organization as compared to within broader library communities like ARL?

I wish I could say I'm the same consistent person, but I'm not. I'm striving to be more integrated, which is a continual journey for me. At Stanford, I was involved in the Taiga leadership forum

and I blogged. I think most of the people at Stanford libraries who read my blog were already aligned with me politically. People weren't really paying that much attention unless they already thought it was interesting. Now that I'm the director, staff who read my blog see it as the words of the director, so they're paying more attention. This realization made me want to be more consistent.

I think that I'm bolder sometimes in stuff I do in the profession outside my role in the MIT library. Outside of the MIT libraries, in the talks I give, on Twitter, and wherever else, to some extent I'm trying to be aspirational. As a director I want to be that too, but I also have to be very practical. I also have to be the director and the leader for everyone in the organization, wherever they are in terms of their commitment to social justice or feminist ideals. Whereas outside the libraries, in a lot of the talks I give, I either assume that people are there, or give that talk anyway and let them catch up.

I'm now thinking about the conversation I had with April Hathcock, Scholarly Communications Librarian at New York University, at the National Diversity in Libraries Conference (NDLC). I'm thinking about whose work is it to bring people along. The amount of privilege that I have now, some of which I've always had, means a lot of that work needs to fall on me, and on people like me more broadly. It's easier to be the angry feminist and give that talk but it's probably time for me to pay a little bit more attention to doing that hard work of bringing well-meaning people along.

I do think that I have been significantly more radical off campus than on, but that's becoming less separate. As a director, people here are reading my blog, so it's not like I can separate these spheres, and that's probably a good thing.

So you're saying that outside in the library community you're more aspirational and with your day-to-day job you're more practical. What I think I understood from that is that you have same values but you're dialing them back a little at work.

Yes, I'm dialing it back a little. I think I'm more cautious and strategic about when I show my hand. But at one of our first all-

staff meetings, the presentation I gave had my favorite bell hooks quote in it, so I'm not hiding who I am. For the record, the bell hooks quote I shared, revised a bit for libraries, is from *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*:

The ~~academy~~ *library* is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The ~~classroom~~ *library*, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is ~~education~~ *librarianship* as the practice of freedom.⁸

So, within MIT libraries you're trying to be a little more moderate so that you don't alienate your staff? Does being more moderate enable you to do the practical day-to-day sort of management of the library?

I was definitely trying to say that. If I want to lead in an inclusive way I have to make all types of people feel welcome in the organization. Coming in as a big, butch lesbian with a feminist agenda may not feel very inclusive to some people. I'm trying to craft that perspective as inclusive, welcoming, and less aggressive than how I am on social media and in my talks.

We are at an important moment in libraries I think—there's a big cohort of liberal-minded folks who've been working in higher ed leadership for a number of years who are well-intentioned people who have not fully confronted racial privilege. They have not fully confronted how power and privilege play out in the academy. I feel my own impatience, in that I want them to come on get with the program, but I recognize that it will take time.

At NDLC I had an "aha" moment on stage with April Hathcock. I realized it's easier for me to be angry about people who don't get racial privilege and white supremacy. I realized that as a white person, I need to do the hard work of suppressing that anger and playing nice to bring people along. If we want to bring along those well-meaning people, who have the capacity to come along, somebody has to be patient. That is on us white folks.

⁸ Chris Bourg. "Radicalism."

That's also my work as a person who has positional privilege too. It is my job to make these values accessible to everyone in my organization. I'm not saying that everyone is going to come on board but I've got to try to make it accessible. This means I need to take a less aggressive and more patient perspective than I do in the broader library community. Out in social media and in my talks, people are either going to like it or not and I don't really care. In my organization I have to care.

Sometimes I think the status quo is almost even more insidious than a conservative leadership style because it's presented as being neutral.

I think that in libraries there's a self-identity of being liberal. There's this assumption that the status quo is liberal or progressive enough.

Because librarianship is a predominantly female profession, and people think that feminism is just about women's equality, they think there's not a problem in libraries. The two questions I get when I talk about a feminist agenda are, "What do you do with people who disagree with your agenda, or expect you be neutral?" and "What about the men?"

What do you say in response to "What about the men?"

I'm still working on it. It's always a man who asks something like, "Given that we're a predominantly female profession, what about the problem of underrepresentation of men?" Often I just say that's not a problem I'm particularly concerned about. I'm just not particularly worried about the plight of professional men in this society. That shuts it down; but I've got to come up with a better answer. I need to come up with a more intersectional answer because I am concerned about men of color. There is a dearth of men of color in our organizations. But in general I'm not super worried about the fact that male librarians are in a minority numerically because the stats show that they actually earn higher salaries, anyway. Men also get to leadership positions more quickly.

Are there any points regarding feminist leadership that you want to include in this conversation that we haven't talked about?

One of things that I talked about at the ACRL talk with Lareese Hall is the value of an inclusive, participatory style of leadership.⁹ I think this is the way to go long-term but it takes so much longer than traditional leadership styles. It's really a slower process of leadership, and that's not necessarily bad, except that it bumps up against our desire for rapid change. For those who are on board with the agenda, there's a desire to make change quickly because there's a pent-up demand for it.

Here's an example. At Stanford, I was able to get us to adopt a recommendation that our librarians only go to conferences that have a code of conduct. I suggested it to the University Librarian, who had a couple of questions about it. I answered them, and he said yes let's do it, and that was it. That's all it took. And while I like the outcome, the process was not an example of feminist leadership. It was a very top-down decision, and not at all an inclusive process to get to that decision.

When I came to MIT, I said I'd like us to do a similar thing, but I didn't want to be top-down. So it took a year. We formed a committee that gathered lots of input. The statement was drafted by committee. It's a much better statement that is more fully thought out than the one we had at Stanford. This thing that I thought was cool and awesome, and that we did at Stanford quickly, took a year to do at MIT. Feminist leadership is slow leadership.

So, if feminist leadership is a slow process, what does feminist succession planning look like?

I worry that being a progressive feminist is in some ways in contradiction with being a leader in a bureaucracy. These jobs are leadership jobs in bureaucracies. So many of the amazing librarians, archivists, and others that I know who work in libraries are feminists who are super progressive, brilliant and active, and who have no desire to move up the chain of command and become leaders in library organizations. I really worry about that.

⁹ Chris Bourg, "Radicalism."

I think that one way of trying to make these jobs more attractive is by creating a sense of openness, making it clear that you can be a feminist and you can hold on to your values. You can be a feminist and be in these jobs and it can be very rewarding. I want to make these jobs attractive to more junior librarians who share these values. One of the reasons I am so open about my work and about the fact that I try to bring these feminist values to my job as a library director is that I hope in some small way to show others that it is possible to be a feminist leader in libraries. I want progressive, feminist, radical, anti-racist folks in this profession to be able to see themselves as library directors and other senior leaders in our libraries and our profession. Ultimately, that's why I agreed to give this interview and why I'm so excited about this book.

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