Espacios de Confianza: Disrupting Power Imbalances Within the Residency Experience

Presented by: Kenya Flash, Jessica Dai, Twanna Hodge, & Sheila García Mazari

: "...I fully understand the desire for safe spaces, for racial sanctuary, particularly in times of racial trauma. I have always had these safe spaces, not by black design, but as a byproduct of white racism."
- Charles Blow

Background

Kenya's story, presented by Twanna Hodge

As a resident, one of the most powerful moments I experienced was the effort expended by a former resident in providing support for a resident who was struggling at her institution. This informal discussion at a conference was a necessary space to help the resident feel seen after months of neglect at their institution. It is important to note that these informal networks of BIPOC residents helping out other residents have always existed, but often were relegated to in person meetings at conferences, which relied on access to spaces.

These espacios de confianza have been absolutely necessary over time as the sponsored mobility systems through residency programs carry implicit burdens for residents. These burdens include the pressure for the resident to be grateful for sponsorship, and undue surveillance of residents' actions and expressions to ensure the appropriate level of gratitude is expressed for said sponsorship. This surveillance extends beyond the residency, as the former resident's successes are often touted as the success of the institution and its leadership, with less emphasis highlighting the resident's own resilience and drive. Indeed, institutions rarely—if ever—report on the attrition rate from residencies. Attrition is often viewed as the personal failing of the resident, as other residents "make it and are successful." What is discounted is the individual's development of informal networks of support to help residents through the stresses of these conditions.

It was with these thoughts and the experience of seeing the power of these connections that the ACRL RIG Discussion Group was formed, to provide the space to facilitate the types of helpful connections fostered any time residents met, regardless of access, with the following tenets:

1. For residents by residents
2. Protected space away from surveillance
3. Engage residents in discussions on the residency experience, even with publishing

While the brainchild for this series was the work of someone who identifies as BIPOC, the documentation and the implementation was by a team of residents (one BIPOC, one not) who worked to provide a safe space for residents to engage and learn from each other- especially since there was no "formal" mechanism at the time. Unfortunately, it was in this space, that a resident who was still at their institution was surveilled and dressed down for their participation in a space that was meant to support. The Dean at their institution decided they would change the name on their Zoom screen and hide their identity, to surveil the resident at their institution. The level of surveillance made the organizers question if they need to end the discussions as neither wanted to facilitate more harm for residents. They eventually decided, in a stance of resistance, to continue, and to instead start the process of asking those who were not residents or former residents to leave at the beginning of each session.

Where RIG Mentorship Discussions are now

Presented by Jessica Dai

When I started as the team lead for the New Members and Mentorship Team in 2019, I was a new resident unaware of the origins of the mentorship discussion, let alone larger issues of residencies and their inherent power dynamics. However, I implicitly understood why we needed this designated space *for and by residents,* both former and current. Residencies operate on a sponsored mobility system upon which residents can access "the system." In this case, the academic libraries represent the system and individual libraries represent the sponsor. Employment after the residency is contingent on the library vetting the resident's entry into academic libraries. For example, though my institution created a position for me after my residency specifically to retain me, I actually doubt whether they would have hired me if I applied for a position and did not participate in a residency here or elsewhere.

The mentorship discussions are a way we attempt to disrupt the power balance inherent in the sponsored mobility system. Rather than solely relying on institutional resources (in the form of supervisors, resources, mentors), the mentorship discussion aimed to be a confidential space for former and current residents to talk about real issues that are difficult to talk about at work. For many solo residents, these were probably one of a few venues to talk about the ways they had to navigate racism, tokenism, and other issues many of our white peers and supervisors are ill equipped to reckon with. In the mentorship discussions, residents can meet other former and current residents to build more informal networks.

There are several other issues that we've noticed with the sponsored mobility system:
- Institutions have many expectations of their residents, but the expectation of institutional loyalty or gratefulness on the part of the residency is particularly bound with the power dynamics of the sponsored mobility system. Many residents may not have the agency to speak up when their organizations are abusive. The outcome of speaking up can be new or continued surveillance, retaliation, or any number of harmful actions. This can impact

the attrition rate for residencies, but specifically for BIPOC in academic libraries. Our field is still enamored with recruiting and building the pipeline but we hope there will be more growing attention to retaining and promoting those who are already here.

- Librarianship in Blackface: BIPOC residents are expected to perform at a high level or be skilled in performing whiteness. We constantly have to prove that we can function at a high or higher level than our peers. This can lead to a myriad of issues including burnout
- BIPOC-only spaces often encourage reverse-code-switching to prove one is BIPOC enough, RIG space is expected to be vulnerable and open to people being who they are. As such, there is less surveillance in RIG, because residencies are inherently surveillant
- BIPOC-RIG members tend to have a protective attitude to other BIPOC members- we have a trauma-informed (most likely institutionally developed) approach

This has not been without challenges. With the development of more diversity residencies, there's an inherent tension between trying to serve the specific needs of BIPOC residents and white residents, since RIG is open to all. When Twanna Hodge was convener, she created a subgroup focused on diversity residencies to help mitigate this. This is something we continue to navigate.

Overall, in engaging with mentorship discussions, these are some strategies that RIG employed to cultivate and espacio de confianza:
- Consistency with mentoring discussions
  - Discussions were facilitated with a general theme
  - There was flexibility with the format during coronavirus
- Provide a human-centered approach, and a culture built around support and trust
  - Facilitators model vulnerability and authenticity, and emotional intelligence
  - Provide continual repetition of cultural approach and reactivity to the world (ie. there are no apologies in this space; no is a full sentence)
  - Reminders that we are volunteers to help shape expectations
- Rules for the space
  - Take the Lesson, not the name; ask for permission to share
- Discussions are about professional and personal support that residents may not have at their institutions

Discussion Questions

Facilitated by Sheila García Mazari

- What intrigues you about the history of building espacios de confianza [Spaces of Trust] in RIG?
  - Are you in need of this space like this within your institution?
- In higher ed and library literature, spaces like the ones created in RIG are often referred to as "safe spaces." In your experience, what constitutes a "safe space?"
  - How do you identify safe people to bond with? What are some red flags when identifying safe people or groups?

- - Are safe spaces aspirational?
- If creating this kind of space, what are ground rules or agreements you think need to be established?
- What challenges do you think there may be in creating these spaces within an institutional context?
  - How can sponsored mobility impact the creation of these spaces for residents?