

Found poetry – Finding home: A qualitative study of homeless immigrant women

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The focus of this article is on the use of found poetry as a tool in qualitative research to examine the experience of precarious housing and homelessness among immigrant women in Montreal. Immigrant and refugee women exhibit greater risk for homelessness than women in general or male newcomers due to higher rates of poverty. Yet little is known about migrant women's experiences of homelessness and less is available from their own perspective, specifically. The article provides a context for understanding female, newcomer homelessness and summarizes the history of the found poem in a variety of disciplines with an emphasis on "social work and the arts" context. This article also details the study methodology and illustrates the process of the found poem technique with two found poems used as data representation. The found poems we present in this article reveal two of the study's key findings related to causes of homelessness: unexpected crises (tipping points) and exploitation.

Keywords *Arts; homelessness; immigrant women; poetic inquiry; poetry therapy; qualitative research; social work*

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the growing body of research on poetic inquiry by examining how found poetry was used to understand and portray the lived experiences of immigrant women subjected to varying degrees of homelessness. Morrissey (2010) defines found poetry, as:

poetry which has been created using another primary source (a piece of prose, a person speaking, a list, even, in some cases, another poem by someone else). The poet shapes this original material into a poem, using the words and phrases found within the document. (para. 1)

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Found poetry, in a research context, is also alternately referred to as “poetic transcription” (Glesne, 1997; Richardson, 2002), “research poetry” (Langer & Furman, 2004a), “data poetry” (Sullivan, Butler-Kisber, Commeryas, & Stewart, 2002), or “poetic inquiry” (Butler-Kisber, 2004). Found poetry is a tool used in qualitative research where, generally speaking, words are extracted from narrative transcripts based on interviews with research subjects.

In the early 1990s, the social sciences, including social work (Furman, Lietz & Langer, 2006), began incorporating found poetry into their research methodology and have used it as a means of inquiry to inform practitioners, policy-makers, and the public about the lived experiences of a variety of vulnerable populations, including people living with HIV (Poindexter, 1998), cancer patients (Kendall & Murray, 2005), people receiving public assistance (Connelly, 2010), and people living with mental illness (Clarke, Febbraro, Hatzipentalis, & Nelson, 2005).

The rationale for including arts-based inquiry in qualitative research—such as the present study—is that using different forms of data analysis and representation can alter the way we understand phenomena (Eisner, 1991). As such, when conducting research with vulnerable populations and relating their problems, researchers are exploring “the kinds of topics that lead into the affective experiential domain” (Prendergast, 2009, p. xxii). Traditional forms of qualitative research, such as the linear prose transcript, are considered to be less potent techniques in terms of fully capturing and evoking emotive experiences (Butler-Kisber, 2005; Shapiro, 2004; Sparkes, Nilges, Swan & Downing, 2003). A second consideration when using poetic transcription is that it amplifies the way voice and authorship are expressed (Furman, Langer, Davis, Gallardo & Kulkarni, 2007) in that it retains the signature of the research participant (Butler-Kisber, 2005). It, therefore, defies more traditional research methods in which researchers are seen as the authority (Glesne, 1997). Social work practice, for its part, is concerned with the empowerment of its clients (Lee, 2001) and poetry therapy, in particular, is regarded as a tool for agency for disadvantaged or oppressed populations in the social work context (Furman, Downey, Jackson & Bender, 2002; Kissman, 1989).

This article will be divided into several sections that will clarify the use of this technique in the context of exploratory qualitative research. First, the history and use of the found poem in various contexts will be discussed. Second, a general description of the study will be given. The methodology of the found poetry utilized in this study will then be explained as well as its meaning to the researchers involved in using the technique. Finally, two of the found poems resulting from this research will be presented, to be followed by a discussion about the implications of this work.

Poetry and the found poem in literature

Poetry has the capacity to attract humankind because of its ability to synthesize experience in a way that imparts musicality, rhythm, and poignancy (Butler-Kisber, 2010). As poet Jane Hirschfield (1997) stated: “poetry’s work is the clarification and magnification of being . . . each time we enter its word-woven and musical invocation,

we give ourselves over to a different mode of knowing” (p. vii). Found poetry has an established history in American literature. Since the first half of the twentieth century, it has been used as a literary tool by American poets, especially by those interested in social justice issues (Prendergast, 2009). For example, Muriel Rukeyser (1938) used this technique in her book *U.S. 1*, creating poems distilled from her interviews with miners in West Virginia about their work-related health problems. Other poets to have used this technique include Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Maya Angelou (Prendergast, 2006).

Social work and the arts

In the late nineteenth century, the arts became an important tool in social work practice as witnessed in the Settlement Movement, a reformist social movement in the USA and Britain, which identified popular participation in the arts as an important goal (Getzel, 1983). Creative expression has long been associated with social group work (Cohen & Johnson, 1997). More recently, poetry therapy has become an important tool in social work practice with a wide variety of vulnerable populations (Mazza, 2003, 2009). One example of an application of found poetry in social work group therapy is a version called the collaborative poem, where group members take pre-existing texts (usually composed by the individual participants themselves) and combine a variety of words and phrases to contribute to a group poem (Golden, 2000).

The poem and found poem in research

Qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, research has always had as a goal to “penetrate into the depths of human experience: to search into the heart of matters” (Furman, 2004, p. 162). As such, qualitative researchers in such disciplines as anthropology (Madison, 2008; McConochrie, 1986), education (Finley, 2000), and social work (Shafer, Maxwell, Strauss & Knopp, 2007) began, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to experiment with poetic inquiry, a specific form of arts-informed processes (Butler-Kisber, 2010) that had gained the attention of academic researchers. The goals in using these new arts-based techniques included making research more embodied and evoking “intellectual, aesthetic and affective responses” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 4) in the consumers of the research.

Poetic inquiry can be broadly defined as the process of writing research poems that helps the researcher develop new insights (Prendergast, 2004). Two forms of poetic inquiry have been predominantly utilized in qualitative research: the research or found poem and the generated or interpretive poem (Faulkner, 2007). The latter involves the researcher writing original poems, either as a means of reflecting on collected data (Prendergast, 2004) or in response to a—usually personal—situation, for example, a father’s diagnoses of lung cancer (Furman, 2004). Both found and generative poems can be used, in turn, as a means of data analysis and data

representation (Furman *et al.*, 2007) or simply as an analytic tool that leads to insight (Butler-Kisber, 2005).

Butler-Kisber (2005) describes found poetry in a research context as the process of taking words, phrases, or whole passages found in data—usually narrative-style interview data—and reframing them as poetry by changing the spacing, line breaks, and by adding and deleting certain words. Langer and Furman (2004b) believe that the found poem may be useful as an alternative means of presenting the participant's voice as the primary transmitter of data. Researchers have ascribed strengths or advantages in using the found poetry technique, including:

- it honors the styles, words, rhythms, and syntax of everyday speech (Richardson, 2002) because the narratives people tell fit naturally into poetic structure (Poindexter, 2002);
- it is an extremely effective form of communicating-lived experience (Connelly, 2010; Richardson, 1993);
- it is a form of description that can represent a movement toward truly understanding the respondent instead of just re-stating the conversation (Geertz, 1973); and
- it is effective for advocacy purposes as its compressed form lends itself to various media (Langer & Furman, 2004b).

All of these attributes encouraged us, as researchers, to explore this method as we sought to analyze and represent immigrant women's experiences with housing and homelessness.

Uncovering invisibilities: immigrant, female, and homeless

This study, carried out by a team of social work researchers at McGill University and the University of Calgary, sought to address the gaps created by the paucity of research directed at understanding, uncovering, and exploring housing insecurity and homelessness of women newcomers. The goals of the study included informing policy-makers, practitioners, and the general public as to the lived experiences of migrant women across the homeless spectrum.

The homeless experiences of migrant women have been the subject of few investigations, typically subsumed within categories of Canadian-born women's homelessness or general themes of newcomers' housing insecurity, both of which are different than the realities of homeless newcomer women. For example, immigrant/refugee women exhibit greater risk for homelessness than women in general or male newcomers due to higher rates of poverty (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2004; Saraswatisi, 2000). As the direct experiences of homeless persons have been absent in informing solutions (Acosto & Toro, 2001), the goal of this project has been to include homeless immigrant/refugee women in outlining specific needs and policy solutions. As they are experts on the issues, inclusion helps to ensure the policies and interventions are responsive to their needs (Lombe & Sherraden, 2008).

Definitions of homelessness include both lacking shelter and living with precarious housing (Begin, Casavant, Miller Chenier & Dupuis, 1999). In addition to experiencing barriers to housing shared by their Canadian born counterparts, homeless women migrants are marginalized by their invisibility (Fiedler, Schuurman & Hyndman, 2006). Few use shelters or social services (Preston *et al.*, 2009) often not knowing which services exist. Migrant women may also face barriers to emergency or temporary shelters due to language barriers and lack of culturally appropriate services (Shirwadkar, 2004; Tutty, Thurston, Christensen & Eisener, 2003).

Finding *home* through found poetry: the research project

With the goal of documenting immigrant women's experiences of housing insecurity and homelessness, this project sought methods that would allow women with various immigration statuses to express themselves and share their understandings of their situations. Semi-structured interviews were implemented in order to invite the perspectives of migrant women experiencing precarious housing. Women were recruited either by word of mouth or advertisements posted in local shelters, immigrant settlement agencies, and women's centers. Interview questions were divided into the following themes: life history and immigration experiences, history of housing insecurity in Canada, current housing situation, personal survival strategies and coping mechanisms, health concerns, community resources which they have found helpful, and recommendations for policy and practice.

After significant groundwork to recruit this difficult-to-reach population, 26 women took part in the study, all but one of whom had arrived in Montreal within the past 10 years. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 40 years and had come from a wide variety of ethnic and national backgrounds, and most were women of color. Many of the study participants had minor children and the majority had high school and/or college degrees and significant work experience in their countries of origin. Most of the women interviewed were either unaccompanied by a spouse or unmarried at the time of the interview.

Statements from the women consistently demonstrated that the primary cause of housing insecurity for newcomer women is that of inadequate income in the face of rising housing costs. Discrimination due to presence of children, or ethnicity, a history of trauma, and language barriers were cited by many women as prohibitive factors in finding stable housing.

As the migrant women brought their stories to life, researchers began to look for a means through which this diversity of voices could be represented to the government, to organizations serving migrant women, and to the community at large. A close reading of the transcripts revealed six major causative factors in newcomer women's homelessness: discrimination, unexpected crises (tipping points), exploitation, isolation, poor-living conditions, and personal histories of emotional and mental suffering. In order to communicate these themes to members of the general public and to homeless women or women experiencing housing

insecurity themselves, the team created a series of vignettes to illustrate women's experiences. A textile artist was also invited to create works symbolically representing these vignettes.

Using found poetry: method and meaning

Found poetry had not been the original intention of this research team. The initial proposal contained a plan to do an audio–visual presentation of the women telling parts of their story. This proved challenging as the transient nature of many women interviewed and the relative complexity of their lives meant that we would not have been able to relocate many of the participants, few would have had the time to participate in the video-making and their visibility in video-making would have been problematic for this marginalized and oppressed population. Found poetry was chosen instead to accomplish a similar goal: to represent the women's experiences in their own voices. Contrary to the case studies in which researchers imposed their own language while attempting to most accurately represent the content of the interviews, found poetry featured the women's voices directly in ways that protected their confidentiality.

The poems were written by four team members who used slightly different approaches in creating the found poetry. Some used the audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews to write the poem; others used only the transcripts; and one wrote poetry based on select excerpts from the interview transcripts. Although no words were altered, researchers used “poetic license” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 87) and re-arranged the words in a different order than in the original text using repetition for emphasis. Of those who constructed the poems, all had experience in writing as well as an interest in poetry though only one individual had extensive experience in writing poetry, having published in the field. None of the writers had implemented this method of data representation in prior research projects.

As the researchers read through the transcripts, they looked for words, phrases, and manners of expression that repeated themselves. Butler-Kisber (2002) describes attempting to replicate the interviewee's unique rhythm, pauses, emphasis, breath-points, syntax, and diction (p. 233). The writers also highlighted the words, phrases, and expressions that appeared to most poignantly capture a specific aspect of a woman's monolog. These words were then placed in a way that punctuated specific themes.

The meaning of the found poetry writing experience varied from writer to writer. For those who had followed the stories of the women from the beginning of the project, the writing of the poetry “altered” the way in which the phenomena was understood (Eisner, 1991). The meaning of the women's narrative had already become visible through the physical interview, followed by transcribing, coding, and discussion—an already thorough process. Yet the act of found poetry writing invited reflection on other aspects of each woman's story: not only what she said but also how she said it, not only the subdivided categories of themes but also the overall theme that she may have wished to convey. In one particular instance, the

attunement of the researcher–writer to the above-mentioned factors in poetic construction was especially compelling. One woman had experienced significant emotional pain and suffering in her country of origin, having lived in a refugee camp. Once again finding herself homeless, her emotional condition deteriorated. Her interview narrative was disjointed and difficult to follow. Putting her words into poetry meant conveying her rapidly changing thought patterns while looking for the underlying thread linking her narrative to the place at the center of her poem. In this case, a dual interconnected theme became evident, that of transience and a search for stability. The found poem remained true to this woman’s communication style while allowing the reader access to the reality and the strength of her story.

To be sure, found poetry has an interpretive component and to some degree represents the subjective experience of the writer. However, this does not preclude the fact that writing found poetry or reading the rendition of another provided added insights in data analysis for this particular project. For example, one of the women described her building sense of helplessness and frustration as landlords asked her which country she was from and, on hearing her response, would refuse her an apartment. She resolved this problem one day by emphatically asserting to the landlord that she belonged, telling him that she was a citizen, and was granted her apartment. This phrase was taken from the middle of her interview and used to conclude her poem. These three words reflected her strength, while also communicating the challenge expressed by many of the women who fought language, social, ethnic, and economic barriers to be recognized as people who belonged and deserved respect and dignity.

For those who entered the writing project after the research had been conducted and the interviews transcribed and discussed, the meaning was also significant. One of the writers was also engaged in research with immigrant women and found the interviews enlightening, contributing to her understanding of the unique challenges faced by migrant women, as well as, confirming the many strengths that she had also experienced with this population. For the team member with extensive poetic experience, the found poetry exercise represented an artistic challenge as it was the first time this individual had crafted poems from narrative text. For this member, the exercise also permitted a coming together of two distinct and compelling interests in her life: poetry and social justice issues.

The next sections share two of the found poems and discuss the creation processes. The first found poem is based on the narrative of a young woman from the Philippines who came as a domestic worker through a temporary foreign worker program. The second poem is based on the narrative of a woman from Central Africa whose homeless trajectory began as an asylum seeker. In both cases, pseudonyms are used and some details are altered to protect the women’s identities.

Migrant women seeking home: understanding through poetry

Anna made the difficult decision to leave her husband and children behind in the Philippines when her children were young. She came to Montreal through the

Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP), where women work as caregivers to children, seniors or people with disabilities while living in the home of the employer for a period of up to four years (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, n.d.) After this time, and under certain conditions, they can apply for permanent residence status and remain in the country as well as sponsor relatives to join them. Between airfare fees paid to the agency that found her an employer and other costs, Anna paid nearly 4000 dollars to come to North America. However, once having arrived, she was told that the employer who had requested her had changed his mind. As a newcomer, she suddenly had no place to live and no finances to return home. She found herself dependent on the agency to arrange for food and lodging. She ended up living in very overcrowded quarters provided by the agency with a number of other Filipina women. Eventually, she found a second position as a caregiver, but when she became ill, was fired. She finally ended up with a third family in a rural location where conditions were described as much better. During this time, she continued to send whatever money she had available in the form of remittances to relatives in the Philippines.

The notion of space and of not having a room of one's own, or enough room, was a recurrent theme in Anna's story. In addition, the precarious nature of being reliant on an employer for lodging, of finding new accommodations quickly, and having to settle for what one can find was another leitmotif in Anna's story. Most importantly, the sacrifice of being away and longing for her children was the overarching sentiment she expressed.

Six in one room
 A three and a half
 Sleep in the kitchen
 in the living room
 Some of our income to the Philippines
 Family, children in the Philippines
 Bring them from the Philippines
 Live-in, live-out
 Caregiver program
 Not enough room of your own
 Fired, hired, fired
 Illegal work
 A new job in the Eastern Townships
 A member of the family
 A big sacrifice
 And longing

Nayika is over 50 years of age. She migrated almost 10 years ago from Burundi and, through her church work, ended up living with people from her country of origin. This family promised protection, a home and a job looking after the family's children. Unfortunately, Nayika was never paid after almost a year of labor and her employers/friends became abusive. As she did not have permanent residency status

and was an asylum claimant, she had no recourse to defend her rights. Another person from her country of origin offered to step in and help her out by offering her a room in his three-bedroom home. This individual also abused her trust when he insisted that she share the bedroom with him. This proposition was against her religious beliefs and unacceptable to her. Nayika ended up being evicted and, with nowhere to turn to, living, for a brief period of time, on the streets After much time and effort, Nayika managed to get both somewhat reasonable lodgings of her own and eventually, citizenship.

Nayika's story represents another dilemma faced by many immigrant women. Women who migrate alone often do so because they have relatives or friends who have previously immigrated and who they intend to join. Women in this situation identified that those from their own country are best suited to help them through the immigration and integration processes because of a shared language, dietary habits, and cultural background. These migrant women may end up living with these relatives or friends but, in many cases, the relationships are only acquaintances from their home country or people they met upon arrival. In either case, the women are in a state of utter dependency on these people. Unfortunately, these situations often do not turn out for the best: people are often living in very cramped conditions, there can be personality conflicts, and sometimes the newcomer women, as was the case with Nayika, find themselves subjected to abuse and betrayal. They are then forced to find alternative lodging as a result.

In reviewing Nayika's story, the emotion of betrayal was the overwhelming sentiment expressed. The fact that she had trusted acquaintances from her country of origin to help her and that these people at the outset seemed friendly and welcoming led to Nayika's feeling of deception. In the end, it is obvious that she has been taken advantage of. The sentiment of betrayal was characterized by the repetition of the phrase "I trusted them," which is also the title of the poem.

I trusted them
I felt protected
Living with people
They had been in this country for a long time
They knew all the rules
They are people from my own place
I was alone, I didn't have family
I trusted them
They welcomed me
I felt I met
Like friends, like family
I felt safe with them
I trusted them
I worked hard
For a whole year, not getting my pay
I did not know what to do

I still did not have my papers
I trusted them

Discussion

The two poems detailed in this article represent the reality of many migrant newcomer women. Found poetry representation allows readers to feel the sense of constrained space, lodging insecurity, and dependency that is too often the experience of this population. The feelings expressed in the two poems—longing in the first poem and betrayal in the second—allow for a more visceral understanding of the situation of the two women interviewed.

As previously mentioned, found poetry is considered to be an effective technique to express the everyday reality of people, in particular that of vulnerable populations who often live in constant states of heightened emotion such as fear, helplessness, anger, or dread. In research, there is often a paucity of data that reflects the realities of these populations, as certainly is the case in newcomer women struggling to find adequate housing. It could be said, then, that using the found poetry technique in this study helps fill the gaps in the research and does so in a highly evocative manner.

As one of the goals of this study is to inform the public of the lived experience of newcomer women in terms of housing insecurity and homelessness, found poetry is an effective technique in that it too has as a goal the accessibility of information to the consumers of research.

The second group targeted by this study are practitioners who offer services to immigrant women, whether it be in homeless shelters, women's centers or other community-based organizations. For practitioners, the found poetry technique offers an alternative means of understanding and communicating the day-to-day realities of their clientele other than the usual annual- or community-based reports that often rely on statistics or interview-style narratives.

The final consumers of this research are the policy-makers at the government level. According to Connelly (2010), found poetry allows the connection from the personal to the public sphere to occur because, as policy is necessarily linked with everyday events, re-presenting the day-to-day lives of those directly affected by these policies through poetry allows for policy evaluation. Connelly, who used the data poem technique in her research with low-income Australians, states that "through these poems it becomes possible to pinpoint those policies that have a negative impact . . . and how they might be more appropriately designed to assist rather than disadvantage" (p. 38).

Ultimately, social work and other social science researchers may decide to incorporate the found poetry technique along with more conventional forms of research as an alternate and potent form of presenting data. There is certainly much room for exploration and development in this area, especially when it comes to relating the lived experiences of immigrant populations.

Conclusion

The found or research poem has been examined in its historical and interdisciplinary contexts. Poetic techniques, particularly found poetry—the technique that extracts words and phrases from narrative text to create poetic form—have a history in literature, the social sciences, and within a social work framework. That social work researchers would now incorporate this specific technique when conducting qualitative studies lies well within the values of the tradition: to empower vulnerable populations and value their lived experiences. By presenting two found poems about housing insecurity among newcomer migrant women, it is hoped that the potency of such a technique has become evident as well as its capacity to help consumers understand experience in a different way. By revealing certain results of their study through two found poems, this research team hopes to contribute to the growing body of research on poetic inquiry, especially in a social work context.

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