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# **Sometimes you have to go under water to come up: A poetic, critical realist approach to documenting the voices of homeless immigrant women**

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## **Abstract**

Methodological debates concerning feminist research design tend to focus more on the process of data collection than on the process of data representation. Nevertheless, data representation is fraught with difficulties, especially in communicating research findings concerning vulnerable populations to diverse individuals and groups. How do feminist social work researchers represent the voice of the research participants to community and service organizations while simultaneously meeting the expectations of the academic or political institutions soliciting the research? In this article, we discuss how we approached this dilemma with data collected through a research study on immigrant women experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. Guided by feminist methodological principles, we drew on the tenets of critical realist theory, integrating this analysis with poetic inquiry to reconstruct the women's voices in the representations of research data. We discuss these modalities and provide two case examples to illustrate their application.

## **Keywords**

Critical realism, feminism, homelessness, immigrant women, poetic inquiry

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## Introduction

Feminist researchers have explored the daily-lived realities of women and the social inequalities that occur where gender intersects with societal values and political institutions (Ackerly and True, 2010; De Valt, 1996; Weber, 2007). Feminist research methods are rooted in a wide variety of epistemological and methodological approaches which emphasize the voice of women while identifying the power structures that have until now silenced them (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006; Faulkner et al., 2009; Fonow and Cook, 2005). Weber (2007) has challenged feminist researchers to go even further, to not only identify the power relationships active in the lives of women but to examine the mechanisms of oppression that perpetuate this power. Though mechanisms that generate events are not always directly perceived, they are very real, producing 'discernable effects' (Houston, 2010: 75). Researchers must look specifically at how power relationships are co-constructed and which generative mechanisms influence their functioning. A critical realist analysis invites us to discern these processes that effect injustice as well as those that facilitate equitable outcomes. To most accurately represent the specific generating mechanisms influencing women's lives, and to shape public policy, one must draw not only on diverse methods of data analysis but also diverse forms of representation (Lather, 2004; Weber, 2007).

Within feminist clinical social work practice, poetry has been used to empower clients (Kissman, 1989), primarily as a form of therapy (Cohen and Johnson, 1997; Furman et al., 2008; Mazza, 1996). Only recently are social workers beginning to implement poetry in research (Langer and Furman, 2004). This research team had the task of analyzing immigrant women's stories of homelessness and housing insecurity and to represent these research findings to diverse audiences: research participants, social researchers, policy makers and the general public. We therefore chose two poetry writing techniques. We compared poetic analysis using a standard found poetry technique with a poetic analysis of the same interview based on the identification of generative mechanisms using critical realist theory. We begin this article with a description of our project before offering an overview of the literature on both poetic inquiry and critical realism. We then elaborate on the process of writing and analysis found in each poetic re-construction of the women's narratives, concluding with some reflections on the place of a poetic, critical realist representation of research findings.

## Sharing the stories of women

This research began as a small government-commissioned study on immigrant women's experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity within their first 10 years of arrival in Canada.<sup>1</sup> We conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 newcomer women and met with five key informants working in the shelter system. Interviews were conducted in English or French, though for most women, these were their second or third languages. We asked women about their immigration

trajectories including current immigration status, their post-arrival story of homelessness or insecure housing, their attempts to find housing solutions, and their sources of strength and support.

In our attempt to communicate the lived realities of newcomer women and housing to a variety of audiences, we analyzed and represented the data using three different techniques. First, we used the software NVIVO to identify and code significant themes present in the interviews. These were synthesized as major findings and discussed in our report to the government, to service providers, and to community groups. Second, we used critical realist theory to identify the generating mechanisms spoken of by the immigrant women, mechanisms that fostered both inequitable and positive outcomes. These mechanisms were discussed at conferences and in community meetings. Third, we drew on poetic inquiry to portray the individual voices of several women. Poetic inquiry allowed us to analyze, re-construct and re-present the written transcripts, providing a three-dimensional, embodied voice to women who had been made invisible, marginalized and silenced in their newfound country. Several of these poems were either displayed or read in community events and were included in our government report.

## Poetic inquiry

Poetry's strength lies in its capacity to awaken and transform the reader concerning subjects that may not have otherwise captured the imagination. Poetic forms of data representation are becoming increasingly commonplace in qualitative research with at least 40 terms used to describe how this has been accomplished (Prendergast, 2009). Lahman et al. (2010) categorized these into six major poetic research strategies: *data poems* in which the participants' own words are used to write poetry, *participant poetry as data* in which poems are collected from the research participant, *autoethnographic poetry* whereby researchers represent their personal experiences, *research experience poems* which represent the researchers' experiences in their study, *cultural poetry research* which looks at uses of poetry from an anthropological perspective, and *poetic allusion* whereby researchers draw on the wider body of published poetry to use as references in their texts. We entered this research endeavour conscious of the enormous vulnerability faced by participants and of the many ways in which our social location already added a layer of subjectivity to our findings. We therefore turned to the *data poem* approach as this allowed us to highlight the voices of the women themselves. Data poems are described both as found poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2002, 2010) and poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997; Richardson, 2002) in the literature.

Poetic transcription and found poetry have been used by researchers to 'privilege the importance of orality' in historically marginalized cultures (Calafell, 2004: 180). This method invites the researcher to choose, eliminate, and organize participants' words to form an abstract representation of the essence of experience (Glesne, 1997). The chronology within prose is replaced by poetry in which there is constant interplay between parts and the whole. 'The poem is a whole which

makes sense of its parts and a poem is parts that anticipate, shadow, undergird the whole' (Richardson, 1993: 705). In the creation of a data poem, poetry uses the exact words of the interviewee. Nonetheless, the subjective and interpretive process in the writing of data poems is no less present than in other forms of poetry.

### *Poetry and integrity*

Oral and written language in all forms is at best an imperfect representation of human experience (Langer and Furman, 2004). If all word symbols, written or spoken, fall short in portraying human occurrences, how do we make judgements between available mediums? If all research is intersubjective by nature, poetry *highlights* this space and offers words that can 'open up the "between" of intersubjective space' between research participant and the audience (Todres and Galvin, 2008: 572). The reader is invited into relationship, to engage imaginatively with others and thus reduce the potential risk of objectifying categorizations of the other. Eisner (1991) describes the role of language in the arts to do justice to the unseen. Metaphor, lyric, emotion, imagery, rhythm and other language devices provide an alternative way of knowing (Prendergast, 2009). Poetic language penetrates experience, representing the sensory and evocative components of words not possible through linear representations (Furman, 2006). Poetry allows for a non-linear representation of data in which the multi-dimensional intersectionalities of women experiencing various forms of oppression due to race, gender, class or disability can be represented (Petersen, 2012). The integrity of the human 'subject' is maintained as specifics can be noted among the generalities (Carroll et al., 2011) in this interplay between the whole and its parts. Poetry, by virtue of its embodied expression, invites a personal response where the small 't' truth of description becomes second to the large 'T' truth in which we see the other through 'the eyes of the spirit' (Glesne, 1997: 213). Poetry is effective when 'audiences feel with, rather than about a poem' all-the-while maintaining narrative truth (Faulkner, 2007: 230). In contrast to a more intellectualized form of listening, the *body* listens to poetry and in this listening, dualisms such as mind-body, intellect-emotion, self-other, researcher-researched on which science is based are collapsed (Richardson, 1993: 706).

### *But is it art or is it research?*

The fraternization of poetry and research is not a hazard-free endeavour. Apprehensions concerning legitimacy and aesthetics arise among artists while discomforts concerning validity and reliability plague the researcher. These tensions, rather than suggesting that this undertaking should be abandoned, can be harnessed to refine poetic inquiry. Shapiro (2004) has suggested that qualitative researchers implementing poetic methods measure validity in the same way that all research is measured. Do the results make sense to the subject? Can other skilled observers agree with or accept the interpretations offered? Do methodology and

conclusions stand up to informed criticism? Can results be triangulated with other forms of description? Do other researchers interacting with the data set arrive at the same conclusions? Has an audit trail been established? Has the researcher continued to revisit his/her interpretation? Depending on how these questions are answered in relationship to the data poem, conclusions concerning reliability and trustworthiness can be offered.

How does one define poetry and respect its art form in the context of research? Piirto (2009) has advocated that researchers who write poetry should at least have a background in poetry education. Butler-Kisber (2010), however, gave a wider berth to researchers by differentiating between 'poet researchers' and 'researcher poets.' She has argued that researchers who are not poets first are capable of poetic representation if willing to develop craft and technique. Clearly, poorly written poetry does disservice both to poet artists and research participants. Yet how does one measure 'good poetry' when the audience consists of research participants, community members, and experts in one's field of study? Based on Barone and Eisner's (2006) criteria for measuring art in research we argue that poetic success in social work research is established when the reader/listener has been illuminated, his or her curiosity aroused, the 'heart of the matter' clearly identified, and when relevance to a population beyond the participant is made evident. These criteria invite poetry to be simultaneously judged by art critic, research participant and the public alike.

## Critical realism

Critical realism posits that we live in three overlapping domains of reality: a) the *real*, referring to causative and generative mechanisms; b) the *actual*, a term used to describe an event itself; and c) the *empirical*, referring to the actual perception of the experience of the event by the individual (Bhaskar, 1975). Mechanisms exist separately from the events that they generate. Events are distinct from the experiences in which they are grasped (Bhaskar, 1975). Critical realism is valuable to the social sciences in its emphasis on the root causes and social structures underlying oppression (Houston, 2001). A critical realist perspective in qualitative migration research is advantageous as it can reveal the interplay between real causative powers such as gender, ethnicity and class and real complex social relations; it allows for an identification of the generative, causative mechanisms of migration related phenomena (Iosifides, 2011). As social workers, we were compelled by the potential in this form of data analysis and representation for the capacity it gave us to speak to community and academic groups.

The women's narratives indicated that homelessness in a wealthy country was an unexpected and difficult to explain outcome of their immigration process. Women could speak articulately of their subjective experiences, but often had incomplete or inaccurate explanations of how their experiences were related to external systems, structures or policies. Few women were aware of how local housing markets and government housing policies had influenced their trajectories into homelessness.

They were clearer in identifying structural powers and barriers related to immigration policies, language requirements and discrimination by landlords, janitors or others. This is consistent with the findings of Clark, Lissel and Davis (2008) who have stated that perceptions of the empirical domain are at best 'fallible representations of the real and actual domains . . . prone to incompleteness and inaccuracies of perception' (p. 69).

Based on our interviews, we deconstructed the unseen/generative mechanisms identified by the women as shaping their current housing situation (the real), the local realities concerning these generative mechanisms, in this case, Montreal, Canada (the actual), and women's personal experiences, both positive and negative, concerning these mechanisms (the empirical). What remained was a 'theory of emergence' (Elder-Vas, 2004: 12), a complex analysis of the multiple levels of generative mechanisms leading to homelessness in the actual local housing and employment context (see Table 1).

### **Integrating found poetry and critical realist theory**

Our process of research representation took place as follows: 1) transcribing of interviews; 2) team discussion of major themes; 3) NVIVO coding based on these themes and additional subthemes; 4) poetry created from poetic transcription based on general readings of the transcripts; 5) a chart created from a critical realist analysis of the data; 6) re-coding of interviews based on categories of the real emerging from the critical realist analysis; and 7) poetry created from poetic transcriptions limited to excerpts related to one specific domain.

While representing findings at a local women's centre, we used a traditional PowerPoint medium and complemented this with an art exhibit of found poems based on our interviews. When meeting with local women's shelters and academic audiences we represented results primarily through the above-mentioned critical realist findings chart. At one point we asked ourselves, what might emerge in found poetry arising from a critical realist analysis?

Sullivan's (2009) criteria in finding an appropriate interview for poetic inquiry provided guidance to choosing our first research participant to represent through poetry. Was the woman concrete in her expression and did her material have an associative logic? Was the uniqueness of her voice accessible in the text? Could we find emotion, tension and ambiguity in her text? For the purposes of this article, we chose two participants' interviews to illustrate the differences in a poetic transcription as described in the literature and a poetic transcription rooted in critical realism. The first poem was written using a found poetry technique in which the researcher combed through the text choosing both *repeating* and *significant phrases* to create a poem. Significant phrases were those which appeared central to the women's story or which were especially poignant in illustrating a particular theme. For the second poem, the researcher coded the same interview according to the generative mechanisms that had been identified in the larger body of women's stories and created a poem based on the *most frequently represented*

**Table 1.** Domains of real, actual and empirical in immigrant women's housing situation.

Domain of Real	Domain of Actual	Domain of Empirical Negative and Positive experiences
Race/ethnicity	Majority of recent immigrants are people of colour, in contrast with the 'white' majority of Canadians	Discrimination, betrayal <i>Community links, cultural strengths</i>
Gender	Women over-represented in nearly all precarious categories of immigration	Job and housing discrimination, safety concerns, social isolation <i>Community</i>
Class/income level	Immigrant women – lowest incomes of all groups, lack of credit history or money for down payments	Exploitation in low paying jobs Difficulty to find adequate housing <i>Awareness of justice and rights</i>
Housing market	Condo construction valued over public housing construction. Housing costs up 30% between 2000 and 2009. Services on local and federal levels to meet housing needs	Difficulty finding safe, suitable, adequate and affordable housing, landlord abuse <i>Qualify for social services</i>
Language	French and English employment requirements	Problems in access to employment and housing due to accent discrimination or lack of language proficiency <i>Connections due to shared native language</i>
Culture: norms around food, communication, decision-making process etc.	Dominant culture shapes how services are offered: health care, shelters, education, job protocol, obtaining housing	Steep cultural learning curves including housing, transportation, currency, food <i>Drawing on culture-based strengths</i>
Family and community	Increased diversity in immigrant family constellations and histories. Breakdown of family units in immigration process	Trauma, abuse, harassment, exploitation, discrimination. Barriers due to presence of children. Need to send money to home country <i>Family/community as support, resource, motivation to continue</i>
Formal education level	Immigrants entering workforce often with higher levels of education and work experience than native-born populations	Employers hesitant to hire immigrant workers even with paid government incentives <i>Education level as pathway for integration</i>
Immigration status	A wide range of statuses confer different rights on different people	Lengthy separations from family; housing service and employment barriers <i>Access to services increasing with permanency status</i>



*generative mechanisms*. We will present our poems here with a short synopsis of what was discovered.

## Poetry and analysis

### *Participant #1, found poetry*

Our first discussion is based on an interview with a woman who had responded to a research recruitment poster hung in a housing advocacy organization. She had arrived as an undocumented worker, applied for refugee status, and at the time of the interview had gained citizenship. Her two children joined her only after she had gained permanent residency. Since arriving four years ago, she had lived in two large Canadian cities in at least six different housing arrangements.

*What if that was me?*

*I told my landlord*

*there's rusty water comin' from the pipe*

*'Oh the pipes are good.'*

*I can't drink the water.*

*'Oh, the pipes are good.'*

*I haven't used the water, even to cook!*

*He keep sayin', 'oh the pipes are good.'*

*I told the secretary, I'm having problems with the apartment.*

*'No.'*

*Bumps keep comin' on my skin. Come, I have to show you somethin' because they bugs!*

*'Maybe you're the one that brought the bugs here.'*

*I took my friend to the office. He start swearin'.*

*'Oh I'm sorry . . . well maybe the apartment was already infested because an old guy was livin' there,' she says.*

*But no, she didn't want to give back my refund.*

*They don't treat fair, especially when you're an immigrant.*

*They're tellin' you:*

*'You're tryin' to take our space.'*

*'And we're not rentin' to you.'*

*'Maybe you'll trash our apartment.'*

*You do find people like that.*

*But you have to think, what if that was me?*

This first poem was written as the author re-read the text as a whole, looking for repetition, emphasis, emotion, and key phrases concerning housing conditions. It quickly became clear that throughout the interview, the participant shifted between

her own voice and that of her oppressors. To explore this further, several pages of transcript excerpts were arranged into two columns. One, the participants' representation of her own voice; and two, the words that she ascribed to those she viewed as wielding power over her. This included the landlord, the janitor, the board members of the housing co-operative and her fellow citizens. Her interview contained several recreations of this back and forth dialogue interspersed with descriptions of her historical context and personal interpretations. Two portions of her transcript capture her words in linear form:

... then he keep sayin' oh the pipes are good, and there was rusty water coming from the pipe, and I keep tellin' him that I'm not gonna drink the water and in months I haven't even used the water to even cook and at the shower the water used to be itchin' my skin and stuff and I went and I told him and he telled me you know what? You gettin' this is one, ah, you can't get no apartment no cheaper than this and knowin' that you not even qualified with the right documents...

... it was in falls and it was gettin' cold and he kept tellin' me oh the heat is supposed to be turned on a certain time in fall and I'm like, but it's cold in the apartment. You know it was really cold. And he said, ok, so you have to buy your own uh heatin' system and I had no idea what is going on because it's my first time having a- owning my own apartment...

The poetic form allowed us to portray strong themes of injustice and discrimination located throughout her dialogue, themes that she attributed in her interview to her lack of citizenship status and to her racialized identity. The author chose to portray these themes through poetry as they had been present in the stories of many of the women whom we interviewed. What was unique to this participant was her sense of personal agency. Agency, though present in all of our interviews, was most visible in this narrative. She persistently used her voice to demand justice. Following the guidance of Barone and Eisner (2006), the intent of the poem is to illuminate awareness concerning discrimination, stimulate curiosity concerning how this is experienced, communicate the heart of this women's desire to find both a physical and emotional home, and to provide information that others reading this poem may relate to.

### *Participant #1, a critical realist approach to found poetry*

Poetic inquiry is the interpretation of a verbal landscape. Like the photographer confronted by a visual landscape, the researcher poet chooses from a variety of lenses through which to re-present what is seen. This next poem will illustrate the use of a critical realist lens to interpret this same woman's story. In the writing of this poem, the transcript of the interview had been re-coded using the categories listed in the 'domain of the real' in our chart, a list shaped by all 26 interviews.

The researcher then recoded the woman's interview to determine which domains in this particular interview were referred to most frequently. In paying attention to *language, tone and frequency* of reference, a paradox emerged. The intersections of cultural identification and race played heavily in this woman's story both as barrier and source of hope.

We

*We're the immigrants.*

*We speak in English.*

*We have a dialect.*

*We develop your country more than you would ever know.*

*We try to come and look alike.*

*We try to come and make a livin'.*

*We come here knowin' that*

*We have to get a job.*

*We work.*

*We are independent.*

*We are owning our own apartment.*

*We have our own money.*

*We take care of our kids and our babies.*

*We take care of our family in our home country.*

*We are strong.*

*We're the immigrants.*

*I recommend to other women:*

*Try to stay with it.*

*Sometimes you have to go under water to come up.*

*Don't let go.*

*There's always a solution.*

*Go and help yourself.*

*You're here livin' and you have to see yourself livin' as a Canadian.*

Though the first attempt at poetry had highlighted the research participant's individual strength and vulnerability in the face of oppression, poetry based on a critical realist analysis made it clear that strong culture, migrant, and gender identifications were at work. What had gone completely unnoticed until coding for the generative mechanisms as both positive and negative influences in her trajectory, was the interviewee's use of the word 'we.' She had a strong cultural identification with women in her home country as well as with this newfound culture of immigrant women. Although it was not always clear in her discourse to which she was referring.

In the linear process of transcript representation, we may draw on a text such as the one listed below.

We are, we are, we are strong in our own mind, you know so, 'cause if we could take a kid for nine months, why can't we take a usage of our life for nine months or more or extended so be strong all the time' cause you have to be strong for yourself and also for your kids so I'll tell them to just be strong, that's it.

A nonlinear form of representation, however, allows us to draw on this theme weaving throughout her interview:

We are independent . . . We would try to work . . . We try to enjoy every moment that we have back home . . . We are strong . . . We could take a baby for nine months, why can't we make use of our life for nine months more? We the humans make the world chaotic . . . We should live in harmony . . . We need to enlighten our love.

Though the interviewee had discussed how various categories of the domain of the real had influenced her housing situation, for both good and bad, poetic inquiry based on a critical realist analysis revealed that her sense of independence was in fact rooted in a sense of belonging to multiple cultural groups. And surprisingly, in the face of adversity, she widens her use of 'we' to include everyone within her host country.

### *Participant # 2, found poetry*

The second research participant to be discussed had been recruited by a local women's shelter. She had experienced significant trauma in her personal life before immigrating, growing up in a war-torn country. The sheer number of cultural and housing settings this woman had negotiated to come this far was astonishing: from home country- to refugee camp- to an African university- to a European university residence- to a Canadian university residence- to an adult foster home- to two different monastic boarding arrangements- to shelter #1- to shelter # 2- to shelter #3- and to shelter #4 – which is where we caught up with her. She was about to lose her place in the last shelter because she had chosen to stop taking her medications. Highly educated, she had enrolled in a Canadian university to continue her studies, only to experience a psychological breakdown that she described as being due to 'a difficult welcome that had been reserved for me' though did not elaborate. The associative logic in her material was not immediately evident. The effects of her trauma were seen in her interview as she rarely answered questions directly and spoke in a disjointed, non-linear and random fashion. At times her words were indecipherable. She shared that she was hospitalized from time to time and was under the care of a psychiatrist.

*I am an immigrant*

*I am an immigrant, that is to say, a landed immigrant.*

*When I received the papers that said I was a landed immigrant  
I took my suitcases and I left.  
Only me . . . my brother did not join me.*

*I am afraid.  
I am afraid of things like fire.  
I am afraid.  
I don't have enough money on me.  
I moved around,  
an immigrant going from house to house.  
I had to survive winter, and I did.*

*I am an immigrant.  
I remain calm.  
The worry is in my head.  
I want to sleep, I want to forget a little,  
I forget a little.*

*The image of my mother . . .  
'Sleep, I love you!  
Because I love you, I want to see you with the others.  
Everyone else is there, talking, while you are silent.'  
What is in my mind,*

*Immersed in Africa . . .  
Tell me your story.  
I would like to heal.  
The healing of wounds . . .  
They come like a dream,  
like the dreams of a child,  
the desire of a child to be somewhere and to belong.*

The interview on which this poem was based was conducted in French by a researcher whose first language was English. As a result, a Francophone team member wrote the found poem. As she had neither administered nor transcribed this interview, the poetry writing process took on a different meaning. Her initial impressions of the transcription were that of loneliness and inadequacy on the part of the participant; her words appeared flat and difficult to access. Themes of homelessness were not clearly seen in the transcript and the meanings in the text were difficult to determine. Curiously, the process of writing this poem changed her perceptions. As she combed through the transcript selecting words that were repetitive or that struck her as having particular potency, it became clear that there was more to this interview than had initially been evident.

### *Participant #2, a critical realist approach to found poetry*

This interview was also recoded using the domains of the real coming from a critical realist analysis. What emerged in the coding was the fact that interviewee and interviewer were each preoccupied with two different though very related concerns. Our participant had agreed to an interview about housing and our NVIVO coding allowed us to look at her responses and categorize them. But when we took the generating mechanisms she found most prevalent and placed them in poetic form, it became clear that she was very concerned about her ongoing food insecurity. Some of the confusion we had attributed to mental suffering may have been due, in fact, to the interviewer's efforts to remain with an identified research question and interview outline when the participant's preoccupations were elsewhere. We therefore changed tracks to write this poem and compiled phrases in which she referenced food. We broke these down into themes of food storage, food history, food preferences, food customs and traditions, food availability, food survival strategies and miscellaneous statements around food. Within these categories, a narrative emerged comparing the story of what she referred to as the North American, the African and the Immigrant/Refugee. Phrases were organized in titles and text to represent this narrative, then they were translated into English before the poem was written. In the first verse, the word grocery store replaces the local chain store name she had used, the *Metro*.

*Food security: the number of food one has to seek for oneself*

*In the North American context*

*one drinks lots of coffee;*

*one uses refrigerators;*

*one goes to the grocery store;*

*it's totally different, there really isn't a lack of food*

*... maybe lack of food that one is accustomed to.*

*In an African family*

*the strategy to survive is food security;*

*this is what has affected me most in my life.*

*The refugee receives 250 grams of flour,*

*250 grams of oil-*

*food rations for two weeks.*

*I try to have a strategy to survive, to know right away*

*what will be there*

*and what won't be there.*

*Music-art – coffee, ticket for the cafeteria.*

*Women's centres – hot drinks.*

*Concert at the Atwater library – soup, pie, a box of chocolate cookies.*

The following excerpt provides the context for her recent survival choices. She began with 'I' and then shifted to the French term for 'one.' Whether she is seeking to describe her survival strategy in a less personalized sense and/or if she is stating that she sees herself representing one of many, we do not know. Referring to her music therapy (music-art) she states:

I really improved in terms of the number of performances and in terms of performances also the number of songs one could sing. One really improved in terms of food insecurity and food insecurity is the amount of food one must seek for oneself...where one lets oneself be led by the other, one has to sacrifice here and there, but all the same one moves to assure that one is secure food-wise...

'Sacrifice,' 'being led;' how might these terms provide clues as to which generative mechanisms are at work in the service of which systems of domination? We may not have enough information to draw conclusions. We do know however, that this participant is very aware of those in power and makes active choices in relationship to these individuals for the sake of her survival.

## Discussion

Feminist researchers seek to improve the status of women by engaging in a dialogue with them about their lives and concerns with the eventual goal of social change (DeVault, 1996). We have found the use of found poetry in combination with a critical realist analysis of research data to be consistent with feminist research methodologies. By implementing these methods of data analysis and representation, we have been able to identify more clearly where our subjectivity lay when it would otherwise have remained hidden. Through poetry writing, we reconsidered previously held assumptions and became aware of additional themes in the interviews. In the first above-mentioned example, a newcomer initially appeared to be isolated as a self-advocate in repeated situations of exploitation by landlords. Through this process of analysis, we saw that she was constantly acting in the context of an internalized and external community. In the second example, a participant's fragmented pattern of thought had not allowed us to identify *her* salient themes using typical data coding software. We could engage in a reflexive analysis concerning our own reactions and responses to this interview as we approached the interview through the lens of poetic analysis. The coherence that was present in her story could then be seen, understood and represented, making her story more accessible.

The critical realist lens allowed us to identify which generating mechanisms were most salient to individual participants, determining which 'domains of the real' functioned primarily as barriers to housing and which domains were a significant source of strength for the women. Returning to the transcriptions and writing poetry based on categories emerging from domains of the real allowed us to

identify which mechanisms each woman was herself most aware of and to what degree. We noted for example, that few women were aware of local housing trends, immigration patterns and economic changes. Unaware of how these changing realities may have generated some of their difficulties, their efforts to succeed were potentially hindered even more. In addition, rather than only remaining focused on the barriers to housing and external support structures, we could identify the positive generating mechanisms in each woman's story, thereby portraying the women in our study not only as victims of history and politics but also as active agents in their own lives. This information served to valorize women themselves, to support certain initiatives already taken by community organizations, and to provide new ideas to direct service providers.

We found poetry writing based on traditional found poetry methods to be complementary to writing based on a critical realist data analysis, though the latter takes on added significance in social work research where results often lead to concrete changes in policy and programming. Each experience opened our eyes to see what had not been present through traditional coding methods. Integrating critical realism allowed us to see *how* each domain of the actual may have been experienced by the research participant as these were spoken of with varying degrees of intensity, frequency, and descriptiveness. This information is vital to front-line organizations seeking to build on existing strengths in individual and community. In addition, the women we spoke to communicated in French or English, a second or third language for most. The attentiveness to language inherent in poetic methodology invited us to discover some of what had become lost in translation between differences in language, culture, history and social location. We were invited to step out of our methodological frame of transcribing, creating themes, coding, consolidating, and writing to revisit the words as originally stated. This allowed alternative meanings to emerge.

Finally, the use of poetry as data representation invites a wider audience into the dialogue than an academic report while simultaneously actively engaging the audience. The reader/listener is required to respond in one way or another as the art form invites response. It does not allow for passive recipients. Based on community feedback, we found that poetry elicited emotional responses concerning specific aspects of the women's stories. The participants' passions and values had been made visible. Their individual identities had not been obscured by a traditional analysis of what we determined to be most salient based on the voice of the majority.

## Conclusion

Transcriptions, coded interview texts and reports risked reducing our research participants to a two-dimensional text of immigrant women portrayed only as vulnerable, helpless and homeless. A critical realist analysis allowed us to see where the strengths of these newcomers lay without minimizing the reality of their plight. The word *inquiry* in poetic inquiry is under-emphasized in the



literature. In looking at our interviews with an inquisitive mind, we were able to discover and re-present the embodied voice of the research participants – concerned, angry, hopeful, afraid, grieving, intelligent, aware, courageous. Found poetry in the context of a critical realist approach to data analysis can serve to invite a wider audience into the dialogue with oppressed and vulnerable populations while deepening the researchers' understanding of generative mechanisms shaping social issues.

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