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Providing an Authentic Voice? Understanding Migrant Homelessness through Critical Poetic Inquiry

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Abstract: Ethical considerations in social research tend to focus on data collection rather than data interpretation and representation. The tendency of qualitative research to limit ethical concern to confidentiality and anonymity in the representation of data, combined with the academic convention of maintaining an objective distance from the object of study, creates tensions for the reflexive researcher. On the one hand, they must meet academic expectations to communicate findings with demonstrable reliability and validity. At the same time, there are deontological obligations—to protect study participants (and groups they represent) from harm, to honour their contributions accurately and to report with integrity. This article argues for the use of poetic ‘re-presentation’, both as a form of inquiry and unique mode of data representation and as a means of obtaining a deeper understanding of the experience of migration and homelessness. By integrating insights from Critical Race Methodology, the article deploys the concept of ‘counter-storytelling’ through poetic inquiry. The article concludes that this approach enables a nuanced, insightful approach, allowing the authentic voice of migrant groups negotiating the complexities of homelessness to be clearly articulated and heard.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; critical race methodology; homelessness; migration; power



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1. Introduction

Ethical considerations in social research tend generally to focus on data collection methods; considerably less attention is paid to the ethics of data interpretation and representation beyond matters of confidentiality and anonymity (Swauger 2011; Denzin 2003; Currier 2011). The academic conventions of (some) qualitative research studies require researchers to maintain an objective stance when communicating findings, presenting the object of study at a distance which, this article argues, privileges empiricism over other ontological stances—a critique commonly made by critical, postmodern and liberation perspectives (Hall 1999). Such positivist approaches to qualitative research draw heavily from the scientific method in a manner epistemologically more aligned with approaches found in the life sciences—they are particularly problematic when the concerns of marginalised populations are under study: ontological empiricism allows for one way to see the world. That singular vision is, more often than not, reflective of the world view of the dominant group; crucially, it forecloses on the possibility of understanding phenomena in new and different ways (Lopez 2001) through distorting and silencing the experiences of the dominated (Delgado and Stefancic 2000).

The academic imperative of positivist-leaning approaches to qualitative inquiry to discuss social marginality via detached, scientific modalities, suggests objectivity is not only possible but essential for reliability and validity (Hylton 2012). The pretence that social scientists have a monopoly on Truth (with a capital T) and singular access to a ‘God’s eye’ point of view serves to reify the prevailing hegemony undergirding the very social processes that so preoccupy qualitative researchers. Hence, therein lies the tension that researchers studying poverty, social exclusion or oppression, present their findings as scientific, objective and rigorous. Such a distancing effect replicated in the communication of research findings (that is, ostensibly, the hallmark of scholastic rigour particularly in the

applied disciplines) contributes to the production of ‘Otherness’ and is therefore counter-productive to achieving the objective of a politically concerned social science oriented towards social justice (Aldeia 2013).

In response to ‘majoritarian’ discourses of deficit-based conceptualisations of race, ‘new’ critical theorists (such as LatCrit and BlackCrit) and emerging indigenous methodologies (Denzin et al. 2008) call for a ‘decolonisation’ of social research (Smith 2013; Writer 2008). In this vein, Critical Race Theory (CRT) engages directly with power at all stages of the research process, through participatory and emancipatory methods of knowledge production (Bhopal 2000), through to the presentation and dissemination of data. Critical Race Methodology (CRM) therefore emphasises the moral obligation upon ethically aware researchers to be self-reflexive and ‘power-conscious’ in their analyses and re-presentations of social relationships and the human condition (Foste and Irwin 2020). A CRT approach is ‘critical’ in the sense that its corresponding methodologies interrogate the intersections of race, class, gender (and other majority/minority categories of social ordering)—rather than merely placing race at the top of a ‘hierarchy of oppression’, concealing commonality of subjugated experience (Briskin 1990). CRT accounts for the way racial oppression combines with other forms of repression and calls for social justice everywhere, however inequality manifests itself. CRM approaches (including counter-storytelling and other methods of exposing, analysing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege) therefore create narrative space for hitherto silenced voices to emerge and be heard (Solorzano and Yosso 2002).

This article illustrates how integrating poetic inquiry within a CRM framework can overcome the challenges of communicating findings to diverse audiences which meet the expectations of the academy, whilst preserving the integrity of an authentic voice (Hordyk et al. 2014). The specific CRM employed here—counter-storytelling—combined with poetic re-presentation (a specific form of poetic inquiry) provides a unique mode for understanding and representing seldom-heard voices in social research; one that is ‘unafraid of sensual immersions, subjectivities . . . and conspicuous displays of proprietary language’ (Brady 2009, p. xxiv). This article begins by critiquing the limitations of positivist social research methods (deployed in housing studies, for example) by contrasting poetic inquiry with more conventional approaches to data analysis and representation. This brief critique of social science is then followed by a discussion of a ‘critical poetic inquiry’ as a research method—integrating Critical Race Theory (CRT) to produce ‘counter-stories’, in which marginalised voices challenge ‘majoritarian’ accounts of privilege/inequality. Next, the article outlines the process of embedding poetic inquiry in CRM through illustrative ‘data poems’ which reconstruct the voices of participants using comparative research of migrant homelessness. In order to illustrate these ideas, the analysis uses two literary forms, *found poetry* and *tanka*, to illustrate the ways in which meaning shifts by imposing varying degrees of constraint on form and rhythm. The conclusion argues that a reflexive analysis based on critical poetic inquiry offers a unique mode of data representation—one that challenges dominant power relations and considers the wider potential application of poetic counter-stories in social research.

2. Materials and Methods: Poetry as Inquiry and Representation

Poetic inquiry is a form of arts-based research that incorporates verse as a component of qualitative investigations (Prendergast 2009). Found in social science fields such as anthropology, education, geography, psychology, social work, sociology, as well as in the medical professions, poetic inquiry draws on the literary arts in an attempt to more ‘authentically’ express human experience (Faulkner 2017). As such, poetic inquiry is an interdisciplinary endeavour, combining social science with creative writing in the fine arts, as well as literary theory and philosophy of language in the humanities (McCulliss 2013). As a mode of inquiry, the use of poetry is more frequently found in autobiographical investigations and autoethnography and ‘practiced on the margins’ of qualitative research by poets and scholars (Prendergast 2009, p. xxxvii). Fundamentally, poetic inquiry presents

a way of knowing through lyrical forms and literary devices such as metaphor, imagery, and symbolism. It invites us to ‘be in the world’ through emotion, attention and self-revelation (Prendergast 2009). Self-evidently, poetry itself is not a science—but when applied to social science (as in the artistic technique of *bricolage*), there arises hermeneutical potential for new interpretations about shared objects of study to emerge. In the spirit of epistemological pluralism, poetic inquiry or the ‘practice of embodied interpretation’ more generally, demonstrates that there is more than one way to say and know things (Galvin and Todres 2009).

The process of poetic inquiry calls for empathy and attention to the conscious emotional experience of reflexive analysis (Burkitt 2012). Researchers write themselves into specific landscapes and situations (emotional and social) as they are in relation to others. In contrast to more conventional forms of qualitative analysis, poetic inquiry closes the social divisions of certain ‘Otherness’ explicitly by shortening the distance between ‘one self-conscious interiority to another’, as poet-researcher Ivan Brady elaborates:

Instead of being inverted like a telescope for a distancing effect, poetics turns it back around for magnified encounters with life as lived, up close and personal, and sets it in a mode where everything reported is proprietary, overtly as the authors write about their presence in the research or implicitly on the strength of always claiming the representations as a personal product (interpretation) of sorts (Brady 2009, p. x1).

In describing what Brady (2009) calls the ‘earthy context’ that poetic inquiry can access more directly (and profoundly) the researcher and audience, are connected to the culturally-constructed worlds of people under study—much in the same manner as ‘thick description’ can portray agency and intentionality in social research (Ponterotto 2006). The lyrical assemblage of sedimented language that is characteristic of poetics as an artform therefore becomes a tool for discovery and a unique mode of communicating findings, when applied to social research (Richardson 2004). Importantly, the use of poetry-as-research and other forms of expressive arts research supplements reflexive accounts and deepens the concept of positionality in research activity (Leavy 2020). More broadly, creative practices enable us to explore what knowing ‘feels like’ in practice, and challenges epistemological assumptions about how knowledge is produced, gathered, known and valued. Crucially, integrating creative practice in social science research—for example, by deploying poetic inquiry as a methodology—introduces risk-taking and experimentation into the production of knowledge.

Critical Poetic Inquiry as Methodology

This article makes use of what is called ‘non-representational theory’ (Thrift 2008) to explain forces that may be ‘fleeting, ephemeral, not-quite subjective, diffused, distributed and difficult to grasp’ (Boyd and Edwardes 2019, p. 1). By focusing on the ‘embodied experience’, such theories can make use of creativity within the research process to emphasise the importance of co-production, participation, experimentation and risk-taking. The importance of such approaches is to ask different questions, identify innovative methodologies and engage with diverse stakeholders (Hawkins and Hughes 2019).

This idea is closely linked to the notion of an ‘affective turn’ in cultural geography (Boyd and Edwardes 2019), drawing on the idea of a world that is not static—it ‘takes place’. Here, there is an emphasis on movement and in drawing on the work of Thrift (2008) non-representational theory can be described as geography of ‘what happens’. Hence, ‘places become spaces through acts of doing, performing and creating. Spaces are lived’ (Boyd n.d.). In a similar vein, Zebracki (2019) has examined the involvement of the gay liberation movement in New York and the transformative potential of public artwork, which uses situated experimental research. This article draws on such insights to analyse the power of imagination, creativity and ‘productive affective exchange’. The objective is to overcome what Denzin (2003) has termed the ‘triple crisis in qualitative research’; that of ‘representation, legitimation and praxis’.

Poetic inquiry was born out of a perceived need to respond to the so-called ‘crisis of representation’ in postmodern critical perspectives and address a specific conundrum within social science research (Prendergast 2009). Briefly, such a ‘crisis’ arises from the question: If fieldwork is an interpretive act, and therefore research is subject to the ‘vicissitudes of interpretation’ (van Maanen 1988), then how can one claim any authority to represent others? (Denzin 1997). For ‘critical poetic inquirers’ (Prendergast 2015, p. 683), the solution lies in epistemological pluralism (Taylor and Medina 2011).

Similarly, CRM speaks to an earlier (but nonetheless still relevant) modernist research paradigm that seeks an abstract truth of life. Critical Race Theorists, instead, argue whatever is portrayed as ‘objective’ and ‘real’ is achieved through exercising privilege and drawing upon tacit knowledge among persons in the dominant group, whilst distorting and silencing the experiences of the dominated (Delgado and Stefancic 2000). Conversely, acknowledging (and elevating) subjugated discourses offers implicit recognition that there is more than one way to view the world, whilst opening up possibilities for understanding phenomena in new and different ways (Lopez 2001). CRT and its associated methodologies therefore reveal dominant claims to neutrality and objectivity—specifically, in the articulation of a singular, authoritative voice—as an alibi for protecting power and privilege. Both poetic inquiry and CRM use ‘authentic voice’ to (re)assert authority and highlight the intersections between power and difference.

3. Voice as Power

Issues of authenticity, alongside aesthetics, utility and transformational power have been identified by Chilton and Leavy (2014) as criteria for arts-based research. Similarly, the (contested) notion of ‘narrative truth’ is one of several criteria at the intersection of art and science—used to assess the aesthetic and epistemic commitment of poetic inquiring work (Faulkner 2016). Beyond aesthetics, the deployment of authentic voice as a literary device can usefully show the interplay between power and difference (Faulkner 2016), as Hordyk et al. (2014) illustrate in a data poem showcasing how research participants alternate their own voice with that of their oppressors (for example, landlords, immigration officers or social workers) in a performative re-enactment of significant events. Authenticity creates an embodied experience and therefore has the potential to disrupt usual ways of thinking (Faulkner 2017). Particularly notable examples of using poetry to provoke cognitive disruption include Hartnett’s (2003) ‘investigative prison poems’ which used verses written by inmates—with annotations based on interviews with guards—to reveal the carceral condition imposed by jails. Similarly, González’s (1998) ethnographic poems supplied a critique of the non-Indian appropriation of Native American spiritual practices, whilst protecting the anonymity of participants. These examples illustrate how poetry can make ‘the invisible world visible’ (Parini 2008, p. 181) in more than one way—by penetrating the secret, interior worlds of human consciousness, and also in a more literal way by accessing hidden practices and social relations.

Voice itself, therefore, has transformative properties capable of rupturing silence (Darder 1995). For critical poetic inquirers, ‘voice’ becomes the political action that challenges the domination that silences (Hooks 1989). Authentic voice is a means by which to counteract oppressive practices and create transformation, through naming, reflecting and creating new dialogues about shared realities (Berta-Ávila 2003). As a ‘culturally relevant methodology’, critical poetic inquiry is capable of protest by aiding minoritised and justice-oriented researchers to amplify counter-narratives (or counter-storytelling) of marginalised research participants (Davis 2019)¹.

Social poetry and counter-stories occupy the overlapping spaces of social science research and humanities to challenge dominant discourses (Leggo 2008)—which privilege Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, Christians and heterosexuals—by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference (Solorzano and Yosso 2002, p. 28). Critical poetic enquiry invites us to engage as ‘active witnesses within our own research sites’ to support equity, human rights and justice (Prendergast 2015, p. 683).

Similarly, Critical Race Theorists use counter-storytelling as an analytical tool, specifically for the purpose of exposing, analysing, and challenging dominant discourses about racial privilege to ‘further the struggle’ for social equality (Solorzano and Yosso 2002, p. 32). Just as poetry makes strange the everyday, CRM questions and challenges the status quo.

Protest is also a form of resistance/defiance as well as a political act, and critical poetic inquirers recognise the power of literary forms to reinforce cultural bonds and counteract forces of assimilation that conspire to erase minoritised identity. Poetry and stories strengthen the ties that bind (as members of a community, and as humans). Poems and stories inform as well as entertain, whilst signalling important cultural norms and moral codes; they show the embodied experience of daily life (Hartnett 2003). In ‘synoptic judgment’, social poetry and counter-stories allow us to ‘see together’ and connect us to larger cultural, historical, and political conditions (Polkinghorne 1988). As a literary form and research methodology, poetry and storytelling can be a means of survival and resistance among marginalised groups—in some cases, going beyond demands for a right to be heard, to enable fighting for a right to exist (Berta-Ávila 2003). The following sections outline how research data can be reconsidered using specific literary devices and forms of poetic inquiry, to explore the articulation of voice as power.

3.1. Authentic Voice in Found Poetry and ‘Tankas’

The following two data poems reconstruct the voices of 13 research participants from five different countries who participated in a comparative study on migrant homelessness, conducted in 2015². The research involved two case studies analysing the experience of homelessness from the perspectives of Central American nationals in the American city of Boston and Eastern European migrants in the Scottish capital of Edinburgh. The data were interpreted in what Prendergast (2009) describes as *vox participare*, or participant-voiced poems.³ Sometimes referred to as ‘poetic re-presentation’, this method of inquiry involves selecting exact words and phrases from interview transcripts and using that language when representing a participant’s story (Faulkner 2017). Interviews were conducted in four different languages (English, Spanish, Polish and Romanian) with an interpreter present during the conversation and complete transcripts were translated verbatim in the language spoken at the interview, presented alongside interpretation in English⁴.

A biographical approach was taken in the semi-structured interviews, prompting participants to discuss their experiences of migration and homelessness—asking for example: What was life like growing up? What were your hopes for moving abroad? What is it like where you live now? This research focuses on the key themes arising as participants outlined their struggles, triumphs, and everyday concerns experienced in the process of migrating. The study was particularly concerned with the drivers of homelessness following migration, and therefore much of the data concerned the capacity for agency in the context of extreme, constrained choice. The data poems presented here concentrate on the main theme of ‘survival’—a dominant concept across the interviews and, for many of the participants, one which encompassed the participants’ primary explanation for migrating. Typically, in poetic transcription a poem is ‘found’ from one interview; in this case, one poem re-presents several voices, with some participants appearing more than once, depending on the frequency of the theme occurring in the interview and the salience with which themes were discussed.

In considering the theme of survival, two data poems were created—first, crafting the data poem in the style of ‘found poetry’⁵ by constructing poetry out of extracted passages from text-based sources (Walsh 2006). and, the second, by reconstituting the ‘found’ poem in the form of the Japanese-inspired American *tanka*⁶ (a literary cousin of a *haiku*), to compare the aesthetics and ‘affect in context’ (Furman 2006) of a free-verse version, against a form which imposes constraints on form and rhythm. In such ‘constrained poetry’ (Prendergast 2009), the literary form creates self-imposed limitations on presentation style, or in the case of data poems, constraints on data re-presentation. These rule-based poems are offered alongside an unbounded, found poetry version (on which the constrained

verse is based) to demonstrate, firstly, how changing the assembly of words shifts meaning and attention within a changing context, and secondly, how conforming to constraints of rule-based literary forms can instil artistic discipline in researchers (especially for those without an arts or humanities background) required to create a more ‘successful’ poem, both in terms of aesthetics and its intended emotional impact on the reader (Prendergast 2009). The following discussion therefore examines the theme of ‘survival’ through the presentation of the two contrasting literary forms to illustrate the ways in which found and constrained poetry can achieve CRM objectives of demonstrating the interplay between power and difference; deploying authentic voice and challenging dominant discourses through counter-narratives.

3.2. *Survival*

The theme of ‘survival’ was voiced by participants who experienced the most extreme forms of constraint in the profound hardship of displacement, the trauma of the process of involuntary migration and the quotidian struggles encountered in resettlement and homelessness. A found poem, presented below, was ‘discovered’ using verbatim phrases in (translated) interview transcripts which represented subsistence as a key force compelling migration. Much like the process of axial coding in traditional qualitative analysis, exact quotes were chosen based on passages that illustrated the theme, in the most salient and effective way. Adding poetic inquiry to the analysis, these quotes were reduced further, selecting literary devices (such as metaphor and imagery), embodied experience and proprietary language in a ‘cut-up’ process of interpretation (Adema 2017). ‘Cuttings’ from the transcripts were then assembled in a free-verse, four-line poem of six stanzas (Torres 2005).

In relation to positionality, the process of crafting the data poem itself brought me closer to the data, heightening sensitivity to tacit meaning and sharpening emotional attention in ‘sensual immersion’ (Brady 2009, p. xiv). I noticed that by ‘compressing’ the data (Furman 2006, p. 561) to reflect an authentic voice of experience, the emerging language was distinctly evocative and multi-sensory; you hear the growling of stomachs and sounds of singing, you see the stars and star-gaze with the speaker and you feel the violence, the fascination, the desperation and hope. Analysing the data in this deeper, more emotional way, helps open up a direct route to the meaning of experience, bypassing the ‘strange’ and arriving at universal human emotion and social relation (for example, we may not know ‘hunger’, but we can feel hungry). Where the analytical tradition in housing research, for example, might ‘strip the essence and important meanings from the experience or phenomenon being explored’, poetic inquiry turns this process of compression on its head to shift the focus towards texture and ‘affect in context’ (Furman 2006, p. 561). Below is the poem I ‘found’ in the interview transcripts on the theme of survival.

Survival—a found poem

It is an unsafe country.
We have an embarrassing country.
Over there, it is like that.
I didn’t want to leave, but . . .

The stomach is growling
Everything in your body make music
Telling joke or singing or looking at the stars
The night, we don’t eat.

Always hard, always like this. Poor.
I was fascinated . . .

but later I was afraid.
Very intense, the domestic violence.

They wanted to catch him
The communists abusively confiscated our house.
And that's when we, I really realised I was hungry
There were others before us.

Our house just collapsed.
It was my house, shabby
I, I was desperate to get out of my house.
That is why I left.

And then, looking for the cure, I came here.
Because here, there were good doctors
I could buy a house, where I could live.
She makes things *look*⁷ easy.

Where the resulting data poem succeeds as a mode of inquiry, it is perhaps less successful as a verse in its own right. Being untrained in the literary arts, the structure of the poem mimics archetypical poetic verse in my philistine imagination. Found poetry, as in other kinds of 'found' art, makes art by using objects that are not art, *per se*, and re-presenting them in a new, artistic context. For the data selected to form a poem, attention to the aesthetic qualities of the new context in which it is placed is crucial for the work to be more than a 'spambot' cobbling of text (James 2009) and instead become the 'artful assemblage of language, raised to methodological strategy' (Brady 2009, p. xvi). As Prendergast (2009) admits, sometimes poetic inquiry is 'a failed experiment that may function effectively for the purposes of the inquiry but does not sustain nor reward reader engagement as in a successful poem' (p. xxxvi). To remedy this failing, I have reassembled the data in the found poem into a series of four *tankas*, included below.

Survival—in 4 Tankas

An unsafe country
An embarrassing country
It is like that there
Not wanting to leave, but go
As the stomach is growling

Bodies make music
While singing and star-looking
The night, we don't eat
Always hard, always like this.
Fascinated, but afraid.

Violent and intense.
Rebel-kidnapping ... ransom.
Abusively takes
Our home now confiscated.
I realised I was hungry

This is why I left
 My shabby, collapsing house
 Desperate—get out!
 Us coming here, cure-looking
 House-looking, new life-looking

Employing poetry in this way, as a distinctive mode of data representation, requires the researcher to make decisions about what is essential, not unlike data analysis in qualitative research. In deploying constrained poetry, additional literary decisions must be made with regard to rhythm in the portrayal of the essential. *Tanka*, the poetic form used in this example, imposes a high degree of constraint on the shape of the data poem. Dating back to 8th century Japan, the *tanka* is a relative of the more widely known *haiku* but is slightly longer and comprised of five unrhymed lines of five, seven, five, seven and seven syllables (5–7–5–7–7) as opposed to just three unrhymed lines of five, seven and five syllables (5–7–5) (Furman 2006). This heavily reduced poem concentrates the essence of words in a highly succinct fashion. In fact, the brevity of the format, I felt, curtailed the meaning of the original found poem much too severely. In order to retain the original sentiment portrayed in the data, a new poem was constructed of a series of *tankas*. By expanding the constrained format, the depth and richness of the interviews were maintained without being overly reduced.

A trade-off was also made between the use of proprietary language and retaining the essential meaning of the text. The search for ‘cut-up’ text that conformed to either five or seven syllables proved too constraining; staying true to the exact language used in the transcripts whilst conforming to a 5–7–5–7–7 rhythmic pattern risked a loss of meaning in the pursuit of aesthetics. Instead, I used different words and phrasing to approximate authentic meaning. As Brady (2009) writes of the poetic process, ‘pot-stirring has it that successful representation often boils down simply to picking the right vocabulary for describing the problem at hand’ (p. xxi). I felt this approach counted as an acceptable compromise, particularly since the transcripts themselves were a palimpsest—containing multiple layers of meaning. These layers were literal, through the process of translation, as well as metaphorical, as the language was sedimented through interpretation and re-interpretation. In the poem, there is not one viewpoint, but at least five: participant, interpreter, researcher, translator and reader. Meaning is mediated through these disparate perspectives and interpretation is therefore complex and inherently challenging.

Nevertheless, when presented in this constrained and much-reduced form, analysis comes into sharper focus. As a counter-narrative, the account offers a compelling challenge to discourses of migration in what can be a uniquely minoritised experience; one which is (often) alien to the (White/male/non-migrant) dominant group. For example, the first two lines (An unsafe country/An embarrassing country) portray an anonymous and ambiguous quality; it is unclear what country is being referred to. Could it very well be yours? The ‘country’ in question could be the sending country or the receiving country. Both contexts speak to the deep dislocation that characterises the migrant experience, as well as to the hostility experienced by the dislocated, on both sides of the border.

The poem then takes a deadly serious turn, detailing the circumstances’ violent specificities which fuel external displacement at a global scale (Rebel-kidnapping ... ransom/My shabby, collapsing house). The fear here is clearly communicated (Violent and intense/Desperate—get out!). However, amid the horror of this reality, a sense of agency and intention is articulated (Us coming here, cure-looking/House-looking, new life-looking). There persists hope in even the most ominous circumstances—like a beautiful evening primrose blooming in darkness or the fragrant water lily that grows from mud. Strategically placing more hopeful statements at the end of the poem, in contrast to the preceding lines which convey something altogether more terrifying, reflects the process of (permanent) migration itself—which is fundamentally an aspirational pursuit. As a

counter-story, this poem challenges the majoritarian narrative of ‘vulnerability’, that depicts (Othered) people as hapless and passive supplicants, and instead shows the processes by which people are placed in vulnerable positions (as a result of hegemonic forces) and which they can actively resist. In this way, a critical poetic inquiry into migrant homelessness (re)introduces the importance of agency in our understanding of housing precarity and social marginalisation.

4. Discussion: Authentic Voice in Critical Poetic Inquiry

Consistent with CRM, this article critiques discourses of ‘vulnerability’ in migration, homelessness and housing studies. Such deficit-based, ‘pathological’ models of disadvantage overlook the capacity of individuals to exercise personal choice, preference and values in even the most constrained of circumstances. Elsewhere, I have pointed to a certain blindness to agency in conversations about homelessness ([Serpa 2019](#)). In a similar vein, [Aldeia’s \(2013\)](#) governmentality analysis of homelessness research revealed a ‘dominant regime of truth’, constituted by two separate (but complementary) approaches to investigating the phenomenon: quantification and ‘pathological individualization’ (p. 64)⁸.

Through the deployment of counter-stories (told within the data poems) I attempt to bring ‘dominated’ perspectives into the frame by writing in, rather than erasing out, the actors, spaces and interactions that are vital to the study of social life. Analysing life stories is a difficult scholastic task; the ‘data’ is ambiguous, idiosyncratic (sometimes contradictory and inexplicable), always complicated and very human. The resulting critical poetic reading of the stories is therefore unashamedly Janus-faced: the struggles are manifold (to survive from one day to the next, to keep families safe). as are the triumphs—having safely crossed borders and gaining a toehold on a new life, however precarious, is a celebration of human determination. There is agency in constraint. There are harrowing tales of the fight for survival alongside audacious stories of realising aspirations. As a mode of analysis, critical poetic inquiry allows for a more nuanced understanding of complex social processes, such as migrant homelessness, through the power of authentic voice.

The deployment of authentic voice requires critical reflexivity, in the process of inquiry as well as the presentation of data. Both literary theory and Critical Race Theory use ‘authentic voice’ as a key philosophical tenet but in slightly different ways. In CRM, authentic voice speaks to a political need for a culturally sensitive, accurate and well-crafted representation of race and ethnicity in research, whilst authenticity in a literary sense refers to the aesthetic quality of voice in creative writing ([Morgan et al. 2006](#)). Strictly speaking, found poetry—in this case, poetry constructed wholly from interview transcripts—is the act of preserving authentic voice in analysis. The found poem itself is an assembly of language, as told participants (and their interpreters) and reconstituted in a different context—with subtle shifts of meaning as fragments of text are presented anew. The approach I have taken with (both versions of) *Survival* is to strategically place text fragments from one interview alongside ‘cuttings’ from other interviews speaking on the same theme (as opposed to a poetic transcription approach which constructs a poem from one interview). Although the words are not spoken by one person, the poetic reconstruction of participant voice *feels* more authentic than a more distanced representation of the data. That is the power of poetry over prose: ‘the clarification and magnification of being’ ([Hirshfield 1997](#), p. 5).

It should be acknowledged that there are inevitable limitations in reliance on poetic enquiry. The approach is necessarily selective and offers considerable autonomy in interpretation to the author of the ‘found’ verse. In using distilled material and making use of literary (rather than ‘traditional’ academic) devices the approach can be criticised for a lack of ‘rigour’ and for what may seem as an emotive rather than strictly rational response to research findings. It can also be criticised for assuming that the interpretation provided represents an authentic response as opposed to alternative interpretations. However, a poetic approach should be seen as a supplement rather than an alternative to a more mainstream qualitative study. It offers a distinctive alternative to mainstream enquiry; one

which foregrounds the language and responses of participants. The key benefit lies in its critique of claims to expertise and academic authority.

Employing different literary forms in *critical poetic* analysis and re-presentation of data posed an interesting question concerning authenticity: is constrained poetry a ‘culturally relevant methodology’ (Davis 2019) when the words of participants are so heavily edited in re-presentation? In the strictest sense of the word, the series of *tankas* included in this article are wholly *inauthentic*; the data poem is a composite piece of several voices (each presenting their own unique tapestry of experience), which is then deconstructed and reconstituted in a new voice (the researcher’s) using a different set of vocabulary. Inauthenticity in counter-narratives would appear oxymoronic in a method that deploys voice as power. The two data poems presented here have attempted to demonstrate that ‘authentic voice’ is more than the words which constitute our language; it is the sentiment and meaning which is conveyed by their context. Poetic inquiry is, like all poetry, concerned with the ‘creative language-based processes of constraint, synthesis, crystallization, image, and lyrical forms’ (Prendergast 2009, p. xxxvi). As Brady (2009) explains, poetry is a way of constructing lines and meanings in spoken or written work for aesthetic results (and more); sometimes poems are ‘deliberately fictionalized realities that “ring true”’ (p. xiv).

5. Conclusions

In the data poems, I attempt to account for life’s exigencies, in full colour, through reconstructing the voices of participants in two poetic forms: *found poetry* and *tankas*. There was nothing straightforward about any of the participants’ stories: exposition shifted, lacking chronology without explanation, involving complicated plotlines with a large cast of characters. Frustratingly, *denouement*—the point in the narrative arc when everything makes sense—is lost in translation. In many respects, poetic inquiry deals better with the humanness of qualitative data; stories often lack discernible logic, and they sometimes demand an emotional, rather than rational response.

Poetic inquiry implicates the ‘black box’ that lies behind the human face in the analysis and representation of data (Brady 2009, p. xiii), inviting empathetic understanding of the psychic space others occupy as participants, researchers and audiences. As a mode of inquiry, poetic re-presentation brings the researcher closer to the data and offers significant and different insights (Butler-Kisber 2002). A new relationship is established between the data and the researcher through heightened sensitivity to the emotional cues in the data, focussing attention to patterns, repetition, emphasis, hesitations, ambiguities, telling silences, the rhythm of different speaking styles, the tactile use of imagery and other idiosyncrasies in our use of language. Emphasising the uniquely individual nature of poetic inquiry keeps the ‘premature closing of thinking in check’ (Prendergast 2009); in a way that more conventional analysis and straightforward prose presentation can rarely access (Faulkner and Ruby 2015).

Writing poetry and storytelling are both forms of social action; each is a method of representation of life, foregrounding language and creating shared meaning through celebration and criticism (Prendergast 2009). As a research approach, poetic inquiry and counter-storytelling demand deep contemplation or ‘fierce meditation’ on language and associated behaviours (such as choosing methods) by the researcher in the exercise of uncovering layers of reality (Kusserow 2008, p. 75), all in the effort to improve our ability to represent experience. For the poet scholar or artist-researcher, representing data—assembling words in context—is ‘practically everything for conveying meaning’ (Brady 2009). For the ‘critical poetic inquirer’ (Prendergast 2015, p. 683), that meaning is about power, voice and protest.

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Notes

- ¹ Counter-storytelling as a CRM emerged from a pedagogical approach to ‘decolonise’ education inspired by the work of Paulo Freire (Freire 1968; Solorzano and Yosso 2002). As a method, counter-storytelling is most frequently deployed in educational research; examples include studies of the experiences of women of colour in higher education (Verjee 2013), research to inform Xicanisma/o student success (Lechuga-Peña and Lechuga 2018), and narrative stories of mathematically successful African American students (Stinson 2008).
- ² The doctoral research on which the data is based consisted of the 30 life stories of participants from seven different countries.
- ³ Participant-voiced poems employ the process of ‘poetic transcription’ which uses verse forms in research, as representation and analysis (Prendergast 2009).
- ⁴ For some interviewees the language in which the interview was conducted was sometimes in their second, third or fourth language even with the assistance of an interpreter.
- ⁵ Text-based sources of ‘found poetry’ have included courtroom legal transcripts (Reznikoff 1965) and Californian vanity licence plates (Nussbaum 1994). The ‘free-verse’ found poetry style is most commonly used in poetic inquiry (Prendergast 2009).
- ⁶ According to Reichold (2011) *tankas* were written as clandestine messages sent between lovers via personal messengers, protecting anonymity by using metaphor to ensure that poems were indecipherable to ‘outsiders.’ The use of *tankas* in poetic inquiry is relatively rare, examples seem to be largely confined within nursing and qualitative health research. Examples include: exploring sensitive topics (Breckenridge and Clark 2017); domestic violence research (Breckenridge 2016); and emergency room care (Furman 2006).
- ⁷ Most poems do not require much exposition around the prose, as the meaning is left open to interpretation—that expressive art is subject to interpretation is, itself, the intrinsic value of art. However, when art is deployed as a methodology as in the case of poetic inquiry, some narrative explanation is required to convey the intended meaning, particularly when important contextual information is lost by imposing particular literary constraints. The use of footnotes and endnotes annotate necessary exposition without interfering too much with aesthetics (Faulkner 2017). This is one particular case where I am inclined to add annotation—the reason why the word *look* is italicised is to add emphasis I observed from the original interview recording. The participant was describing to me the experience of food insecurity and how her older sister (the ‘she’ in the line) helped to distract her from the pains of hunger, by telling jokes and stories at night, talking over the sounds of grumbling tummies while star gazing. In the interview she marvelled at her sister’s strength in coping with such hardship. The peculiar pause right before the word ‘look’ and the stress of the word ‘look’ captured on audio (which I originally missed in the confusion of multiple languages being spoken at interview) made me think about the ambiguity of the statement—its mysteriousness is partly why I included it in the poem. On reflection, I think *look* doubles down on the experience of hunger—it tells not only her own struggle to cope with hunger, but also of her sister’s, that it *looks* easy, rather than *is* easy.
- ⁸ Aldeia (2013) argues that by emphasising major statistical trends (typically within official/statutory data sets), a superficial view of homelessness is produced. It is this process of compression (in housing studies, for example) which strips the essence of experience by way of analysis that prevents access to the plurality of ways of thinking and acting. Simplifying homelessness as a social problem reducible to individual causes (without due consideration for the real structural reasons underlying the phenomenon) amounts to ‘victim blaming’ and serves to naturalise, dismiss, or altogether deny, structural problems within housing systems and institutions concerned with welfare.

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