

CRITIQUE & COMMENTARY

FOOD METHODS IN STATELESSNESS RESEARCH: AN EMBODIED APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING LIVED EXPERIENCE

ELAINE MEI LIEN PRATLEY*

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I INTRODUCTION

In this commentary, I propose using food as a complementary method of inquiry in the field of statelessness research to foster a deeper inclusion of the lived experience of stateless persons and those who are impacted by the implications of such work. Using food as a method and a focus of attention in understanding statelessness makes strategic sense: food insecurity, access, and lack of nutrition are common challenges for stateless people.¹ Moreover, researching the relationships between statelessness and food is a matter of legal compliance, given that most states have ratified international treaties which enshrine obligations to ensure that everyone, stateless people included, have adequate access to food.²

Food-as-method is a term I coined to emphasise that food as a method of inquiry is distinct from food-as-just-sustenance. It has already been mobilised for knowledge production in the social and health sciences: from cooking with migrant women to ‘appreciate the migrant experience... to tasting food with fingers rather than tongue... “Cooking is good to think” with and applies an

* Elaine Mei Lien Pratley is a dialogue practitioner-scholar with Peace Inc. and Peace Kitchen, Australia. She is an affiliate at the Monash Global Peace and Security Centre.

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¹ See, eg, Abul Hasnat Milton et al, ‘Trapped in Statelessness: Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh’ (2017) 14(8) *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 942; Daniel Sullivan, Priyali Sur and Ankita Dan, ‘A Lifetime in Detention’ (Report, Refugees International and The Azadi Project, 16 December 2024) <<https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/a-lifetime-in-detention-rohingya-refugees-in-india/>>, archived at <perma.cc/K5VA-8NMJ>.

² See, eg, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (‘UNHCR’), *Statelessness: An Analytical Framework for Prevention, Reduction and Protection* (Report, 2008) 68; *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, opened for signature 16 December 1966, 993 UNTS 3 (entered into force 3 January 1976) art 11. See also *Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons*, opened for signature 28 September 1954, 360 UNTS 117 (entered into force 6 June 1960) art 23.

embodied way of knowing’,³ but food-as-method encapsulates more than just cooking for knowledge-building. It is an adaptable and inclusive approach, incorporating other methods like walking interviews, participant observation and food elicitation.⁴ Consuming food itself also reminds us that ‘the knowing subject does not maintain distance from the object of knowledge. Instead, subject and object interfere with each other, change each other [and] intertwine’ once food is ingested and becomes part of our physical being.⁵ Food-as-method is an intimate and fleshy research approach.

Based on my research with young migrants and former refugees on their experiences of conflict in Australia, I believe food-as-method may offer a textured and gustative understanding of statelessness beyond legal-political concepts, without relying on stateless people’s ability to describe their experiences. By leveraging familiar food practices, food-as-method can create inclusive spaces that allow stateless individuals or those at risk of statelessness to share their personal narratives beyond their legal status, fostering richer, embodied engagements with their lived experience. These are valuable opportunities, given the longstanding challenge for statelessness researchers has been that stateless people are often a hidden population whose very existence is often erased, silenced or deemed unimportant, and little is known about their everyday lives.⁶

To understand the lived experiences of statelessness, researchers have traditionally drawn on methods like surveys, interviews and focus groups.⁷ Even so, there is a growing motivation within statelessness inquiry to methodologically innovate so that stateless people are further recognised and included in research processes.⁸ This commentary invites statelessness researchers to explore the potential of food-as-method as one possible complementary pathway to researching statelessness, as well as offer some practical suggestions on how this might be applied in research.

³ Elaine ML Pratley, ‘Hungry for Peace: Food and Posthumanist Peacebuilding in an Entangled World’ (PhD Thesis, University of Melbourne, 2023) 82. See also Robyn Longhurst, Lynda Johnston and Elsie Ho, ‘A Visceral Approach: Cooking “At Home” with Migrant Women in Hamilton, New Zealand’ (2009) 34(3) *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 333, 333; Anna Mann et al, ‘Mixing Methods, Tasting Fingers: Notes on an Ethnographic Experiment’ (2011) 1(1) *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 221, 221; David Sutton, ‘Cooking is Good to Think’ (2014) 20(1) *Body & Society* 133, 133.

⁴ Pratley (n 3) 83–7. See generally Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E Truman, *Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human World: Walking Lab* (Routledge 2018) 3–6; Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (Sage, 2nd ed, 2015) 95–116; Susan Cox and Marilys Guillemin, ‘Enhancing Meaning-Making in Research through Sensory Engagement with Material Objects’ (2018) 23(11) *The Qualitative Report* 2754, 2756–7.

⁵ Anne-Marie Mol, *Eating in Theory* (Duke University Press 2021) 73–4.

⁶ Mark Manly and Laura van Waas, ‘The State of Statelessness Research: A Human Rights Imperative’ (2014) 19(1–2) *Tilburg Law Review* 3, 6.

⁷ See, eg, Prosper M Ng’andu and Lewis B Chilufya, ‘Statelessness in the Modern Era: The Plight of Angolan and Rwandan Former Refugees in Contemporary Africa’ (2024) 16(7) *Journal of Current Research* 29321, 29321; Donald Kerwin et al, ‘Statelessness in the United States: A Study to Estimate and Profile the US Stateless Population’ (2020) 8(2) *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 150, 154.

⁸ Raymond Hyma, ‘Participating Statelessness Research: Towards More Inclusive Scholarship’ (2024) 6(1) *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 130, 130. See generally Lindsey N Kingston, ‘Expanding Statelessness Scholarship: The Value of Interdisciplinary Research and Education’ (2019) 1(1) *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 165, 166–7.

II FOOD-AS-METHOD IN PRACTICE

In their pursuit of greater interdisciplinarity, statelessness studies might find some methodological inspiration from how my research collaborators and I used food to learn how young people in Australia understand and experience peace and conflict. Despite the presence of conflict in their lives, young people rarely reflect on conflict or feel confident enough to describe such experiences.⁹ Focus groups and interviews on their own offered relatively thin accounts of lived experiences, with some participants sharing what they believed the researcher wanted to hear. Using structured forms of communication such as those used in interviews were often an unfamiliar experience for participants. To negotiate these challenges, everyday activities were identified as a platform to engage with young people's lived experiences of conflict. The idea of using food as a research method emerged out of the realisation that despite our widely differing life experiences, everyone holds some relationship with food, even if one does not eat for pleasure. In recognising that young people do not commonly frame their experiences in the language of peace and conflict, the research focused on what peace and conflict studies could learn from young people's food experiences and practice.¹⁰

From 2019 to 2022, 31 young people aged 16 to 24 and living in Melbourne participated in my study. They represented an eclectic mix of, for instance, new migrants, former refugees, Australian-born students, vegans and people of various faiths. Despite different life experiences, food-as-method transcended differences to elicit deeply held ideas, family histories and admissions of feelings of shame and disgust in response to specific experiences.

My participants and I developed multi-method approaches in response to their interests and their time availability. Interviews were conducted at food spaces like food courts and farmers markets, providing the opportunity to observe how young people choose what to eat. While heating up lunch or queuing up for food, we discussed how food and food spaces affected my participants. For example, grocery shopping was a surprisingly insightful knowledge-building exercise when done with a Jain participant with very strict food customs. Jainism is an ancient Indian religion that emphasises non-violence and spiritual liberation through ascetic practices.¹¹ During our shopping session, we scrutinised ingredient labels and debated whether to try untested items. As my participant admitted, food shopping is a complicated affair when produce lacking the potential to reproduce life (like pulses) is practically the only permissible thing for a Jain to eat.¹² Nevertheless, it gave me a powerful entry into a practising Jain's world.

Participant observation was an immersive and hands-on experience with food. I was both an active participant and observer at kitchens and community gardens, directly witnessing for myself the affective intensities of young people's routines and unconscious practices. I participated by assisting in two cooking sessions while young people took the lead in menu selection and food preparation. During these occasions, our eating bodies were both engaged participants and instruments

⁹ Pratley (n 3) 80.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Lawrence A Babb, 'The Jain Community' in Mark Juergensmeyer (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions* (Oxford University Press 2009) 51, 52.

¹² See generally Colleen T Sen, 'Jainism and food' in Paul B Thompson and David M Kaplan (eds), *Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics* (Springer 2014) 1297, 1300.

of research.¹³ We watched the movement of food: from cutting board to pot, to plate, to mouth and then to stomach. We tasted and smelled. We washed dishes together. Participant observation provided a full-bodied, multi-sensory engagement with youth participants' ordinary food practices.

To supplement the first-hand experience of being physically present at these group interactions, we initially video recorded a series of sessions. Later analysis of these recordings helped foreground nuances missed in real-time, or impressions that may have seemed too irrelevant for my field notes taken immediately after each event. However, through the iterative development of the method in practice, we concluded that using video to supplement participant observation became a distraction from the more immediate and direct observations that food-as-method offers. Our bodies are already effective recording instruments, eliciting rich sensory insights beyond what could be captured through the mediating lens of a camera. A lesson learnt was that although it offered some utility in subsequent analysis, video recording did not provide sufficient value to the overall methodological aims compared to the outcomes garnered from the more private, in-person space followed by immediate reflexive recording.

Other food elicitation took the form of a potluck workshop where I met participants for a shared meal. More interactive than many focus groups, our workshop centred on food rather than just spoken answers. Each dish added a personal quality to our discussions and time together. Fun and humour were also key ingredients in our gathering. We played blind-tasting games, with many participants tasting plum juice for the first time. Play allowed people to comfortably admit disgust and voice ambivalence. Humour also laid the foundations for serious discussions about violence in its various forms, like poverty and racism, and what a peaceful world might look like. Our casual potluck format created space for the deep sharing of feelings and stories not discussed during interviews.

During the potluck, collaborators paired up to notionally co-create meals that embodied each person in the pair. Rather fortuitously, an avid meat-eater and vegan were paired together. Confronted by their seemingly incompatible values, they first approached the discussions rigidly. However, after giving each other space to defend their values, concessions were slowly made to achieve an acceptable meal: not perfect, but *okay*. While their viewpoints remained largely unchanged, they came away with more trust in each other than when they started.

Some participants separately shared photos of their fridges, discussing why certain items were inside and what might be missing from view. Of those who took videos of their food spaces, they were encouraged to experiment with using unusual angles, take photos up close, or follow things such as ingredient or cooking implements and cooking hands.¹⁴ From these photos and videos, we learnt about the things that are most important to them.

These methods are not an exhaustive list of how to use food as a method of inquiry. Yet, complementing interviews with cooking and eating together provided a multi-sensorial layer to our study. Food-as-method was shaped around participants' interest and time, with many approaches drawing on everyday

¹³ Robyn Longhurst, Elsie Ho and Lynda Johnston, 'Using "the Body" as an "Instrument of Research": Kimch'i and Pavlova' (2008) 40(2) *Area* 208, 209.

¹⁴ Ian Cook, 'Follow the Thing: Papaya' (2004) 36(4) *Antipode* 642, 642; Sarah Pink et al, 'Tactile Digital Ethnography: Researching Mobile Media through the Hand' (2016) 4(2) *Mobile Media and Communication* 237, 242.

routines not requiring additional expertise. Further, the beauty of food-as-method is that it can be based on existing foodways, festivals and customs, such as Lunar New Year feasting, to create generative spaces for research.¹⁵ Food-as-method worked well in understanding young people's relations to conflict as it was adaptable to context and created a non-research atmosphere that put people at ease.

III OPPORTUNITIES FOR STATELESSNESS RESEARCH

My experiences suggest that food-as-method can also offer a productive entry into statelessness inquiry. Statelessness is more than a legal issue: it is a matter of food insecurity, nutrition, identity and belonging. Tahura Enam Navile's ongoing study of Rohingya communities living in camps in Bangladesh touches on how food insecurity and hunger shape stateless experiences.¹⁶ However, by engaging with food-as-method — whether materially through food sharing and rituals or dialogically through oral histories — researchers can also sensitively approach ideas related to identity, belonging and navigating a life of precarity.¹⁷ Where stateless research participants have difficulty appreciating how legal-political concepts like statelessness impact their lives, food-as-method could bypass these abstract ideas to sensorially engage with the mundane lived experiences of living on the margins. Listening to conversations while food is being prepared could give insight into subconscious matters that participants might not share under ordinary research conditions, as they might deem them irrelevant to the study. Observing how stateless people practice their traditional food culture within the daily constraints of no or low rations and income could reveal how they manage financial precarity and nutrition. Documenting recipes and traditional food practices may not only document and potentially revitalise an oppressed culture but could also demonstrate how statelessness impacts a community's traditional food culture. Along with cooking workshops, food memories, food rituals and observing how people prepare and consume food, these various practices could be developed into a food-as-method approach, providing a richer, synaesthetic account of statelessness.

An important advantage of food-as-method is how it can be a democratising and caring research approach: unconstrained by skill, age, language abilities or knowledge about food, it can provide a much-needed intersectional account of statelessness.¹⁸ In my research and dialogic practice, I have worked with teenagers, migrants who speak different languages, and with people who possess little skill in cooking. When facilitated sensitively, food-as-method can elicit

¹⁵ See generally Elaine Pratley, 'Lunar New Year is all about Food, Family, Food, Peacebuilding and Food', *Pursuit* (online, 23 February 2024) <<https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/lunar-new-year-is-all-about-food-family-food-peacebuilding-and-food>>, archived at <perma.cc/5ADM-5WPF>.

¹⁶ Tahura Enam Navile, 'The Rohingya Recipes and Food Practices of Stateless Rohingya Community in Camps of Bangladesh', *Endangered Material Knowledge Programme* (Web Page, 22 August 2023) <<https://www.emkp.org/the-rohingya-recipes-and-food-practices-of-stateless-rohingya-community-in-camps-of-bangladesh/>>, archived at <perma.cc/9BR6-78AT>.

¹⁷ Interview with Niro Kandasamy (Jordana Silverstein, Oral Histories of Statelessness, Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness, 22 September 2023).

¹⁸ See generally Pratley (n 3) 227.

complex memories without dwelling too much on traumatic experiences.¹⁹ Food-as-method is an empathetic research language that helps reticent research collaborators feel at ease, allowing them to engage with the research quickly without relying heavily on words.²⁰ Working with food (or its absence) offers a textured understanding of statelessness without relying on stateless people's abilities to articulate their experiences.²¹ This becomes especially useful when advocating for the rights of stateless people. Because everyone understands the violence of hunger, stateless accounts of food could be effective at conveying the affective and embodied realities of lived experience beyond stateless communities.

The creative act of cooking together might also allow for an imaginative envisioning of a world where those at risk of statelessness are unconstrained by laws and politics. It is conceivable that living in limbo and uncertainty for extended periods of time would create a sense of hopelessness. Nevertheless, Kalyani Inpakumar, a stateless person now residing in Australia, recounts how food helps her imagine the kind of society she would like to live in.²² For Anna Reading, food memories enable those lacking national identity to process the ways in which the 'usual roots/routes to citizenship' become complicated by their statelessness.²³ Food memories offer a means for those rendered stateless to feel connected to the countries that were their temporary refuges, or the source of their statelessness. Digital culinary practices can also be utilised both online and offline to create a sense of belonging and inclusion in a context of prolonged displacement.²⁴ For Yafa El Masri, food spaces and food practices like cooking offer a place and opportunity to cook up resistance and reimagine identities in the face of exclusion from a native land and host community.²⁵ These accounts suggest that food-as-method could support stateless people in envisioning statelessness beyond its legal constraints, exploring their hopes and dreams without distraction/deterrence by the practical steps required to realise them.

Food-as-method allows for complexity by being inclusive of narratives beyond legal status. One of the main challenges in statelessness research is the invisibility and fragmented identities of those with lived experiences.²⁶ Stateless people may not identify with the statelessness community if it jeopardises their safety or

¹⁹ Anna Reading, 'Remembering Statelessness in Food Stories from Jewish Shanghai' in Katherine Swanscutt (ed), *Crafting Chinese Memories: The Art and Materiality of Storytelling* (Berghahn 2022) 121, 123.

²⁰ See Pratley (n 3) 227.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Interview with Kalyani Inpakumar (Jordana Silverstein, Oral Histories of Statelessness Interview, Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness, 21 September 2022) 15–17.

²³ Reading (n 19) 127.

²⁴ Abdul Aziz, 'Food on Display: Connecting Home (Land) and Identity Negotiation of the Rohingya Refugees in Brisbane City' in Ajay Bailey and Kei Otsuki (eds), *Inclusive Cities and Global Urban Transformation* (Springer 2025) 211, 212.

²⁵ Yafa El Masri, 'Food-Making in the Sisterhoods of Bourj Albarajenah Refugee Camp: Towards Radical Food Geographies of Displacement' in Colleen Hammelman, Charles Z Levkoe and Kristin Reynolds (eds), *Radical Food Geographies: Power, Knowledge and Resistance* (Bristol University Press 2024) 206, 206–7.

²⁶ Jozefien Boone, 'A Power Imbalance in Academic Scholarship on Statelessness: A Thematic Analysis of the Academic Literature on Statelessness from 2014 Onwards' (2023) 5(1) *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 76, 79.

because they are unaware of their citizenship status.²⁷ Their individual experiences might be relatively unexplored within the statelessness literature, particularly when they run against assumptions that stateless people are without privileges. For instance, stateless European Jews living in Shanghai during the 1930s possessed contradictory experiences of colonial privilege or power and displacement, and this relationship between colonisation and statelessness is often overlooked.²⁸ Stateless individuals clearly reside in a liminal space, navigating their own personal mix of national, ethnic and cultural identities.²⁹ These diverse personal experiences make it hard for stateless people to act and advocate as a united collective voice.³⁰ To move beyond these difficulties, food-as-method can create inclusive spaces that allow stateless individuals to share their personal narratives beyond their legal status. Food helps people to connect, irrespective of legal identity.

Methodologically, food-as-method offers significant benefits to researchers wanting to collaborate with those they seek to understand. Where traditional participatory action research must be framed as a question that is clear to participants, food-as-method allows for a greater degree of communication/engagement from the start.³¹ Food-as-method works with participants' and researchers' confusion about the research focus and opens up space for participants' own perspectives and questions.³² In recognition of the growing desire to ensure stateless people are in the driving seat of the research process and that they are positioned as experts on their own lived experiences, food-as-method can usefully create safe and meaningful spaces that encourage stateless people's participation in statelessness research.³³

IV CONCLUSION

Food is entangled with many parts of life, making it a valuable tool for researchers and practitioners in the statelessness field. Food can be a common language through its capacity to convey complex feelings and ideas like belonging, connection and acceptance. It is also tied to violent experiences like hunger, food insecurity and ill health. Because everyone has a relationship with food, food-as-method provides a gentle and accessible entry into complex ideas and experiences without reliance on words or participants' full appreciation of the scope of the study. Importantly, it allows a researcher to be respectful of tensions and inconsistencies between experiences within groups and moving beyond 'either/or' identities.

Food-as-method as a complementary method of inquiry offers statelessness researchers a caring means of fostering deeper inclusion of lived experiences as

²⁷ Mary Strode and Melanie Khanna, 'Improving Official Statistics on Stateless People: Challenges, Solutions, and the Road Ahead' (2021) 37(4) *Statistical Journal of the IAOS* 1087, 1092.

²⁸ Liliane Willens, *Stateless in Shanghai* (Earnshaw Books 2010) 100–5.

²⁹ See, eg, Deirdre Brennan, 'Statelessness and the Feminist Toolbox: Another Man-Made Problem with a Feminist Solution?' (2019) 24(2) *Tilburg Law Review* 170, 179.

³⁰ Michelle J Bellino, 'Shifting Ground or Moving Furniture around: Youth Participatory Action Research in Kakuma Refugee Camp' (2023) 54(4) *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 414, 414–5.

³¹ See generally Stephen Kemmis, Robin McTaggart and Rhonda Nixon, *The Action Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research* (Springer, 4th ed, 2014) 95.

³² See generally Pratley (n 3) 80–2.

³³ Hyma (n 8) 136.

well as those who are impacted by the implications of such work. It does not require participants and researchers to possess significant skill or knowledge about food, and it can be inclusive of narratives beyond legal status. Crucially, food-as-method creates safe spaces that encourage stateless people's participation in statelessness research.

However, food-as-method is not without its challenges. Food is a familiar source of conflict, whether social, religious or ethical.³⁴ Participants may also have lost their connection to cultural foodways and cuisines, heightening a sense of identity loss. More practically, managing different food customs and dietary requirements during fieldwork can be a challenging task. Despite my best endeavours to accommodate everyone's food requests during our shared meals and cooking workshops, mistakes were inevitable. Food-as-method is a versatile approach to understanding complex experiences, but it is not without its challenges. Even so, to create a fuller and richer picture of stateless people's lived experiences, I offer food-as-method as an exciting — and hopefully tasty — addition to those developing a multi-method methodology to understanding statelessness.

³⁴ Pratley (n 3) 18–21.