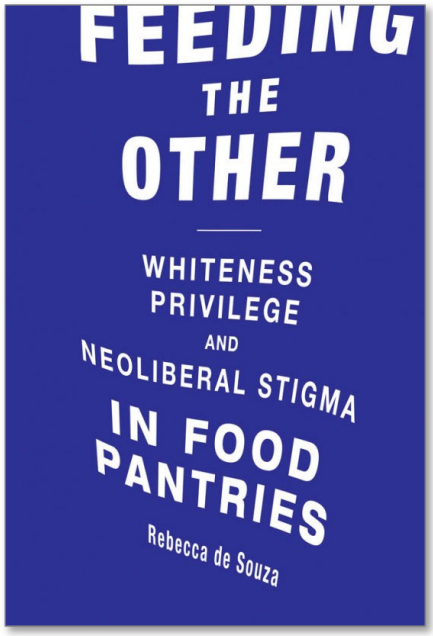
Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development
ISSN: 2152-0801 online
https://www.foodsystemsjournal.org

"Us" and "them" at the food pantry

Review by Amy Rosenthal, Rutgers University *



Review of *Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries,* by Rebecca de Souza. (2019). Co-published by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London. Available in hardcover, paperback, and Kindle; 312 pages. Publisher's website: https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/feeding-other

Submitted September 25, 2019 / Published online February 14, 2020

Citation: Rosenthal, A. (2020). "Us" and "them" at the food pantry [Book review]. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 9*(2), 279–281. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2020.092.021

Food pantries have become a regular part of American life, not only for those who receive food but also for those who provide it through canned food drives, donations at the supermarket, and volunteer events. Millions of adults and children participate in this form of charity, grateful that they have enough to eat and glad that they have a way to "give back."

In her new book, *Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries*, Rebecca de Souza troubles the narrative by which middle- and upper-class, often white, Americans see themselves as doing good through the charitable provision of food. She argues that conventional food assistance reflects and perpetuates the neoliberal, racist, and patriarchal ideologies that underlie our conventional food system and keep certain people poor and hungry. De Souza uses her ethnographic research in two food pantries in Duluth, Minnesota, to show how staff, volunteers, and even clients draw on the neoliberal values of hard work, responsibility, and material wealth to define who deserves food, respect, and citizenship and who deserves suspicion, surveillance, and discipline.

This "neoliberal stigma," as de Souza names it, is demonstrated by the founder of one of the food pantries, who divides people into three types: those who work, those who don't work but want to, and those who don't want to work (chapter 3). He is very clear in stating that his food pantry only intends to help the first two types. This specter of

* Amy Rosenthal is a doctoral candidate at the Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University. She specializes in food policy, especially the ways in which food assistance programs can enhance individual and community well-being. Her dissertation project explores implementation of the National School Lunch Program as related to preparation and consumption of healthy meals. Amy received a master's degree in food studies from New York University and a bachelor's degree in history from Stanford University. She can be contacted at amy.rosenthal@rutgers.edu

the undeserving poor, magnified by racial and gender stereotypes, informs the interactions, discourse, and practices of the individuals and organizations that De Souza presents. For individuals, this stigmatizing process results in an experience of food assistance that is isolating, demeaning, burdensome, and insufficient, especially for women of color. More broadly, it facilitates a "charitable" system that individualizes the problem of food insecurity as one of personal failings and does not adequately address the structural economic and racial inequities that actually cause hunger.

The book's first two chapters provide an overview of food assistance in the U.S. (chapter one) and lay out the conceptual foundations of this argument, drawing from communications, feminist and critical race studies, and political philosophy (chapter two). The unifying commitment across disciplines is to the power of changing discourse; de Souza argues that to counteract neoliberal stigma, we must hear directly from the "Others" who are generally dehumanized and voiceless –that is, the food pantry users.

She practices what she recommends by foregrounding the stories of pantry clients in her first empirical chapter (chapter three). Her interviewees describe the common challenges of poverty in the U.S., but they also describe fond childhood memories, favorite recipes, coping mechanisms, and meaningful relationships. As she explicitly aims to do, De Souza provides a view of "the hungry" as full individuals "with complex, contradictory, and nuanced lives" (p. 219), portraying them beyond the ways they would typically be characterized through the lens of neoliberal stigma.

Chapter four shifts from those in need of food to those providing it, specifically the "good white women" (p. 97) who volunteer at one of the food pantries. De Souza shows the ways in which these individuals, despite their good intentions, perpetuate stigma. The volunteers judge and police pantry clients, valuing those who demonstrate shame and do not look as if they need to use a pantry. Meanwhile, they are suspicious of the regular clients who, in their eyes, do not demonstrate responsibility for themselves and their families. The process of dividing the worthy from the unworthy is even more institutionalized in the pantry described in chapter five. Here, clients make a US$20 donation in return for a basket of hundreds of pounds of food. The ability to pay marks these individuals as responsible and hard-working—worthy of help and dignity—as defined against the "others" who live for free on charity and the government.

Chapters six and seven return to the voices of those using the pantries, exploring the ways in which they have internalized neoliberal values and use them to judge themselves as well as others. Some food pantry clients offer evidence for themselves as hard-working and responsible citizens who take only what they absolutely need, while criticizing others in similar situations (chapter six). Many also try to perform as proper neoliberal citizens by making what are considered to be responsible diet choices, despite their constrained circumstances (chapter seven).

De Souza concludes by offering suggestions for pantries to improve their own practices and encourage broader changes in the food system (chapter eight). They should begin this work by providing more opportunities for clients to tell their stories, as a way to reframe the narrative around hunger and the hungry. Pantries should also take steps to explicitly address their blind spots around racial equity and to change how they act and talk with regard to the work of ending hunger. Instead of providing charity, which ultimately only props up the conventional food system, pantries should become explicitly political spaces where volunteers, clients, donors, and other citizens come together to advocate for the fulfillment of the right to food via alternative food systems and increased government entitlements.

For de Souza, central to this work is changing conceptions of who the poor are. She concludes that she "never found people who did not want to work" (p. 220), and thus conventional narratives of the poor as lazy and irresponsible are wrong. However, this conclusion does not challenge neoliberal values as the rubric on which we judge deservingness, and the reader (or food pantry) is left to think through what a true right to food means in practice and how radically our narratives of deservingness might need to change.

Sparking change is clearly de Souza's goal for the book: each chapter concludes with a brief sec-

tion on policy and practice implications. The clear writing style and engaging voices from her fieldwork should make the book accessible to practitioners in the food assistance system, as well as advanced undergraduate or graduate students, especially those studying food insecurity and/or policy.

Ultimately, de Souza offers a grimly realistic picture of the contemporary American food assistance system. However, she also includes reason for hope, largely from the resilient voices of those most oppressed by the system. Discussions of food insecurity too rarely include these perspectives, making this text a valuable contribution. And while she implicates many of us in the racist and neoliberal ideologies that prop up our food system, she also leaves us with the hope that even small institutions like food pantries can make change, and that by noticing and pushing back against neoliberal stigma we may help shift what appear to be intractable systems and discourses.