

Rebecca de Souza, **Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019, 295 pp., \$90.00 (hardcover), \$30.00 (paperback).

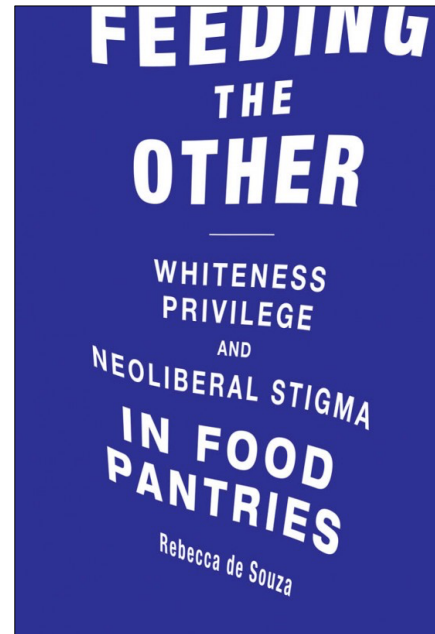
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Research on food and hunger is no longer isolated to nutrition or healthcare; instead, attention is shifting to the political and social role that food holds in U.S. society. In ***Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries***, author Rebecca de Souza begins by emphasizing that food communicates, food is political, and food is a marker of health citizenship. Food justice, and the experiences of people who are food insecure, demand attention to the complicated relations of power, capital, and biopolitical systems that drive the relentless demand and need for food (Gordon & Hunt, 2019). Based on extensive research with two food pantries in Duluth, Minnesota, de Souza explores the neoliberal stigma and discursive privilege present in discussions of food justice.

The title itself highlights key terms that are garnering attention in emerging scholarship, particularly *Whiteness* and *neoliberalism* (e.g., Harvey, 2007; McIntosh, Moon, & Nakayama, 2018). Along with the concept of privilege, these terms can be complex and widely interpreted. A strength of the book is how de Souza provides clear definitions for those terms and illustrates them using stories from her fieldwork. Systemic problems and dominant hunger narratives are brought to life in the descriptions of day-to-day operations in food pantries. In this way, the book illustrates how average interactions represent and reproduce larger systems of meaning.

Through her research, de Souza uncovers a central problem in the food justice system—the belief that laziness and irresponsibility are the true causes of poverty, and that ideology affects food inequality by suggesting that some people are more deserving of help than others. The primary objective of the book is to investigate how those ideological formations are connected to the intertwining domains of political, religious, and economic beliefs. The author manages to tackle the complexity of these issues in a methodical manner that is both theoretically expansive and practically enlightening. One highlight consists of the excerpts from de Souza’s field notes that offer powerful examples of reflexivity.

The first and second chapters provide a strong introduction to the big picture of food insecurity by deconstructing the food system in the United States with historical context, recent statistics, and key concepts. By revealing the complicated ripple effects of poverty governance, industrial surplus, neoliberal trade policies, and lack of food access, de Souza asserts that “the hunger problem is far too vast to be solved by charity” (p. 32). Charity as a solution is contested throughout the book based on the belief that “charity is not justice” and is instead “capitalism at work” (p. 36). De Souza explicates how the reliance on charitable assistance is a



direct result of neoliberalism, which involves the privatization of public resources and the devolution of responsibility from the state to private actors and entities. The qualitative evidence throughout the book maintains these claims by revealing how U.S. society applauds charitable solutions and resists broad-based structural changes like increasing minimum wage, employment, or restructuring the food system. In addition, de Souza displays how the hidden ideologies of charity can be traced to religious discourses like the Protestant work ethic and Calvinist distinctions between the "deserving and undeserving poor" (p. 8). By comparing two food pantries that vary in political and religious orientation, the analysis uncovers the variety of faith-based justifications and responses to poverty.

A significant contribution in the book is the focus on both the visible and invisible. Both chapter 3 and chapter 6 focus on "making the invisible visible" by contextualizing hidden ideologies through stories of the people who sought assistance from food pantries. In doing so, de Souza debunks the neoliberal stigma around people who need assistance to demonstrate that independence and self-reliance are not actually individual responsibilities; rather they are forged in larger institutions and policies. This research orientation is based on Dutta's (2007) culture-centered approach (CCA) to communication and the field of subaltern studies. The book fulfills the goals of these traditions to emphasize absences in dominant knowledge and foreground the voices of those being marginalized. However, CCA also stresses the importance of culture as "a dynamic site of articulation and contestation" (Dutta, 2015, p. 132), and this aspect is not addressed as fully in de Souza's analysis. Chapter 7 hints at those intentions by considering how food-insecure citizens perform health citizenship and make skilled decisions regarding their food selections. Yet, the presence of contestation and the agency of these individuals is incomplete. Throughout the book, the concept of culture is generalized in order to dissect dominant discourses, which results in less attention given to counternarratives and resistance from the subaltern.

The examination of racism and Whiteness is primarily covered in chapter 4, in which de Souza dissects racial disparity, White fragility, and the "good white women" in food pantries. Despite benevolent intentions, volunteers rarely understood their positionality or privilege in relationship to clients. The examples reveal how discrimination operates beneath the surface of everyday interactions and organizational procedures. Chapter 6 supplements those claims by exposing the role of racial stereotypes as integral to the culture of suspicion in food pantries. de Souza finds that "for people of color, racial stigma and the stigma of food assistance were inseparable" (p. 173). The impacts of Whiteness and racism are mentioned in the other chapters as well, indicating how pervasive those issues are; yet, given the title of the book, it was surprising that those topics received less direct attention and often took a back seat to the main focus of food justice.

An important takeaway is de Souza's argument that food pantries have the opportunity to define what social justice looks like from a faith-based and humanist perspective because of their ubiquitous presence. She reasons that, since these organizations are on the frontlines of hunger, they can play an important role in disrupting the stigmatizing narratives that maintain the unjust food system. The argument relies on the idea that "business has shown itself irresponsible and government has shown itself to be business, so FBOs are some of the last spaces to offer countercultural and noncomputational models of living and social exchange" (p. 41). While this makes sense from a bottom-up perspective on change, it is also contrary to de Souza's other claims that charity itself is not the answer because hunger is a larger systemic problem that requires system-wide change.

The contradicting solutions reflect a tension that all advocates for justice face: Systemic problems cannot be solved by one entity alone. The challenge is acknowledged, though indirectly, in the suggestions for both practice and policy adjustments. De Souza recommends that food pantries tackle the frontline narratives and stigma around hunger by debunking stereotypes and educating stakeholders, while rights- and justice-based perspectives need to be pursued through policy changes on national and global scales. The book provides interesting context and introductions to the issue of food sovereignty, so it would be informative for practitioners in that field. However, most of the suggestions call for big-picture changes and shifts in thinking, so anyone looking for clear steps or direction would be disappointed. The topics covered might also be overly theoretical and intimidating for some practitioners.

Academic audiences interested in food justice and rights-based approaches to the issues surrounding hunger are certainly the primary audience for this book. Beyond that field, scholars studying nonprofits and faith-based charities will appreciate the discussions about volunteerism, spiritual entrepreneurship, and what it means to "serve" the poor. As a whole, the book is an exemplar of ethnographic research that could benefit graduate students and scholars who want to learn about qualitative methods and ethnography.

Overall, the book does a phenomenal job of proving that "stigma is not natural or inevitable but created and disrupted through discursive practices that mark people" (p. 185). De Souza traces the fine lines between how people who are food insecure are portrayed as sympathetic, relatable, dishonest, untrustworthy, or shameful based on context. The findings show how the differences between attitudes of sympathy or disdain are socially constructed and used, both intentionally and unintentionally, for political ends. While changing the system will not be easy, the awareness and education that de Souza provides offers hope for resistance and growth.

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