

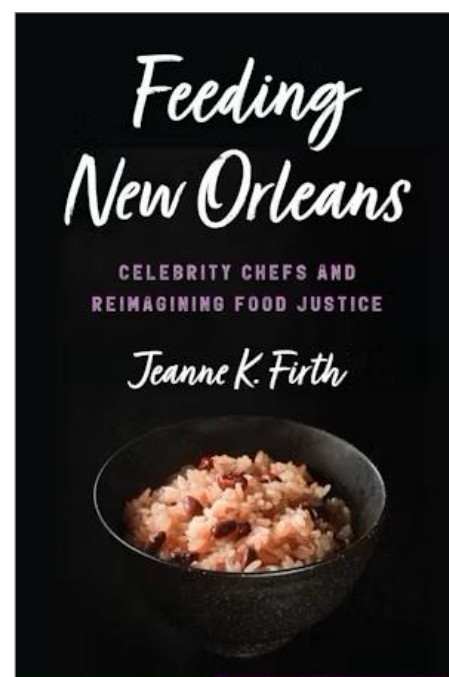
Celebrity chef humanitarianism and the possibility of a “giftless” future for the New Orleans foodscape

Book review by

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A searing and classic anthropological question about the meaning of a “gift” undergirds Jeanne K. Firth’s fantastic ethnography, *Feeding New Orleans: Celebrity Chefs and Reimagining Food Justice*. “Does a gift require inequality or unequal power relations?” (pp. 21, 169). Firth joins a vibrant scholarly conversation that goes back to the

1925 release of Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift*. She traces how anthropologists, feminist scholars, philosophers, and critical theorist have developed theory around gift giving and exchange for decades, and then applies and builds on that theory in a unique ethnographic setting: charities run by celebrity chef philanthropists in New Orleans. She interprets her fieldnotes from charity events and her interviews with scholarship recipients and donors using this theory, illuminating how chef philanthropy has played an integral role in shaping “post-Hurricane Katrina” New Orleans. Firth reveals the way racism, classism, and sexism inform celebrity chef foundations. That said, the book does not only decry how inequality seeps into and is reproduced

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by chef foundations; it also explores how actors across the system both resist and reinforce these dynamics. Additionally, it explores how a focus on the land instead of individualized “heroes,” social movements instead of corporations, and even cooks instead of chefs can create more space and opportunities for justice and liberation.

One of the book’s greatest strengths is Firth’s humility and precise attention to language. As an example, toward the end of the book, she recounts an interview with community chef Roseline and artist Sylvester in which they corrected her description of New Orleans as “post-Katrina.” They say, “We call it ‘post–levee breach.’ It’s important that people be as accurate as they can about circumstances that happened, specifically traumatic events so that you can root source it back and you can heal from it. If you’re working from a falsity at the root, at the foundation, then you’re not going to be able to heal yourself” (p. 122). This piece of wisdom from Sylvester may as well be a mantra throughout the book and to ethnographers across disciplines.

Populated by a diverse set of characters from celebrity chefs with and without foundations, to foundation workers, to community cooks, to activists, and to donors, this book depicts the ways that food has become a stage for performances of both charity and justice, appropriation, and resilience in the New Orleans food scene since the levee breach. Firth’s book opens at Fêtes des chefs, a weekend of fundraising for the John Besh Foundation and their Chefs Move! Scholarship, which sends minority chefs to attend culinary school. John Besh, a central chef figure in Firth’s story, “skyrocketed to stardom because he drastically expanded his corporation through post-disaster speculation” (p. 4). Besh exemplifies the opportunistic white saviorism that is the central object of Firth’s critique, perhaps most pointedly when he throws a crawfish fundraiser for Chefs Move! at his plantation-style house. At the event, mostly white “donor/guests” revel in alcohol-soaked hospitality, and mostly Black winners of the scholarship stand on stage to receive the award with complicated feelings. Firth explores these feelings in interviews with various winners. “Why did it come to this?” one of the scholarship winners, Tajee, asks. Why

he is in a position to accept this scholarship and these other people are in a position to fund it? The answer is because of a legacy of inequality fueled by racism.

By the time Firth is writing, Besh has experienced a serious fall from grace due to allegations of sexual harassment. Although this fact is revealed on page one, a couple of months in the story line and 80 pages of ethnography must pass before Besh becomes persona non grata in the foundation world. Before he is removed from marketing material at his own foundation, he is celebrated as generous, successful, and hospitable. Firth reminds her reader that although she focuses on the food world, the dynamic of celebrity humanitarianism pervades New Orleans across industries, where hordes of celebrities descended in 2005 looking to help or make a name for themselves as humanitarians after the disaster(s) of Hurricane Katrina. These “corporations, celebrities, and philanthropists have become [the] prominent development and humanitarian leaders of the ‘new’ New Orleans” that has used culinary tourism to market and “rebuild” itself (p. 4).

Firth, a white northerner with a complicated, deeply felt relationship to American agriculture, got to know the city as a development scholar and food justice practitioner. She spent five years working at Grow Dat Youth Farm, while also teaching international development at Tulane University. In 2015, she left Grow Dat to “critically reflect on the work that [she] had been immersed in” (p. 17); this reflection became *Feeding New Orleans*, making this book partially an autoethnography. Firth is interested in how Grow Dat, an organization that differs significantly from the many of the foundations that she focuses on, also came to be touched by the toxic culture of high-end dining. In an attempt to maintain some independence from outside foundations, Firth found herself hosting “dinners on the Farm” with celebrity guest chefs, and in doing so, witnessing the transformation of this youth-led radical urban farm into a site for wealthy, mostly white, “donors/guests” to enjoy rarified dining experiences. This example demonstrates how the phenomena of development humanitarianism and “causumerism” have spread throughout the city even into radical spaces one might expect to be

resistant to the “legacies of exploitation [and] exclusion” that define “gourmet culinary imaginaries” (p. 115).

After a self-reflexive introduction, chapter two sets the theoretical foundation for the book; Firth traces anthropological scholarship the gift exchange, and connects it to critical feminist scholarship, critical humanitarian studies, and studies of corporate social responsibility. She introduces Richey and Ponte’s matrix of engaged and disengaged corporate social responsibility (CSR) which she will adapt specifically for restaurants in chapter six. This chapter would have been an exciting moment to bring a historical view of development, chef philanthropy, and food aid by citing Tom Scott-Smith’s *On an Empty Stomach*. Chapters three through five focus in on New Orleans and look at different models for how chefs played an integral role in rebuilding the city after 2005. Chapter four specifically interprets Besh’s crawfish boil fundraiser and its relationship to Southern hospitality, white supremacy, and the legacy of slavery and racism. Chapter 5 also looks at events, largely those of Grow Dat, her own organization. She compares two types of events they hosted: “Dinners on the Farm” (fundraisers run in conjunction with celebrity chefs), and “History of the Land workshops” (free events that aimed to offer education to the community). Chapter five ends by asking more broadly, why do some chefs start philanthropies

and why have others resisted the pressure to join this dynamic? Chapter six returns to the CSR matrix, building on the proximate/distant and engaged/disengaged dichotomies and adding in embedded/disembedded. This new binary emphasizes the geographic component of the CSR. Firth concludes by offering practical next steps for chef practitioners and scholarly questions for future research. To her original question, the answer seems to be yes, giving is inextricable from inequality. So her challenge is: what does a future characterized by “giftlessness” look like?

This work is both theoretically ambitious and methodologically extensive. Firth’s work speaks to scholars from anthropology, critical humanitarian studies, critical race theory, feminist theory, food studies, and organizational sociology, and it belongs on syllabi taught in any of their subjects. Furthermore, while the book belongs in any number of graduate or undergraduate courses, it also offers practical advice to workers in the food system who find themselves expected to participate in the cycles of humanitarianism and charity, such as the woman who owns two restaurants and who receives more than 500 solicitations for charitable donations in a single year. I have been waiting for a book to engage seriously with celebrity chef humanitarianism, and I look forward to seeing how scholars expand Firth’s argument beyond the Bayou.

