

Excerpt from *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Medicine to Heal Divides and Restore Balance* by Edgar Villanueva (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018)

\$127 million. That's how much money I have given away since 2005. Just under a million per month.

That's a significant sum for all but a handful of extremely wealthy people on the planet. It's even more astonishing given that I grew up in poverty. My people are dirt poor. I hail from Robeson County, North Carolina, the third poorest county in the U.S., where more than a third of folks live on less than \$15,000 per year, including most of my extended family. Yet I've made close to \$130 million in philanthropic gifts. If that were 1.3% of my income—the average annual percentage given as donations by the super-wealthy¹— I'd be earning around \$750 million every year.

I would be, that is, if that money were my own. As it happens, I am that rare phenomenon: a Native American working in the field of philanthropy. Those millions are other people's money, entrusted to my hands.

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The field of philanthropy is a living anachronism.

It is (we are) like a stodgy relative wearing clothes that will never come back in fashion. It is adamant that it knows best, holding tight the purse strings. It is stubborn. It fails to get with the times, frustrating the younger folks. It does not care.

¹ Ken Stern, "Why the Rich Don't Give to Charity," *The Atlantic*, April 2013
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/04/why-the-rich-dont-give/309254/> (accessed June 10, 2017).

It is (we are) like a mansion with neo-classical columns and manicured lawns staffed with butlers and maids who pass silver trays of tiny tasteless nibbles (*pigs in blankets, angels on horseback, anyone?*) to guests wearing tailcoats and bustles, as a string quartet plays tunes written centuries ago. No one's voice rises over a certain decibel, no one jokes, no one's words call attention to the ludicrous and unsustainable farce that is the entire scene.

It is (we are) a period play, a costume drama, a fantasy of entitlement, altruism, and superiority. Far too often, it creates (we create) division and suffering rather than progress and healing.

It is (we are) a sleepwalking sector, White zombies spewing the money of dead White people in the name of charity and benevolence.

It is (we are) colonialism in the empire's newest clothes.

It is (we are) racism in institutional form.

Philanthropy moves at a glacial pace. Epidemics and storms hit, communities go under water literally and metaphorically, Black and brown children get shot dead or lose their youth inside jail cells, families are separated across continents, women are abused and beaten and raped, all of Rome burns while we fiddle with another survey on strategies, another study on impact.

Other sectors feel the heat of competition. Not us. We politely nod at the innovations of the business sector; it takes us a half-century to implement one of them. We indulge those who say that diversity is important by conducting several decades of analyses, hiring consulting groups with absurd price-tags. We publish reports. We create a taskforce and debate mightily over what to call it. We do not actually change, not more than superficially.

This is philanthropy. It is (we are) the family that embarrasses me and infuriates me. But it's still my family, my relations, and I believe in redemption. It's from the place of calling this family to a better self that I write.

Philanthropy, honey, it's time for an intervention.

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Most critiques of philanthropy point the accusing finger at things like funding priorities, grantmaking decision processes, the tax code, and payout percentages. As far as I'm concerned, a focus on reforming this stuff is certainly valid, but ultimately about as effective as rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic. Why? Because those are mere symptoms of a virus that has pervaded every aspect, every cell, every interaction. What remains unexamined with those kinds of reforms are frank conversations about where that wealth came from, why it's held back from public coffers, how it's invested as an endowment, and who gets to manage, allocate, and spend it.

My central argument is that what ails philanthropy at its core is colonialism. Almost without exception, funders reinforce the colonial division of Us vs Them, Haves vs Have Nots, and mostly White saviors and White experts vs *poor, needy, urban, disadvantaged, marginalized, at-risk* people (take your pick of euphemisms for people of color). And while my own experience is centered in philanthropy, the same dynamics basically hold true across what I call the loans-to-gifts spectrum: Bank loans. Venture capital. Municipal bonds. Even social and ethical finance, impact investments, and humanitarian aid.

When it comes to getting or giving access to money, White men are usually in charge, and everyone else has to be twice (or more) as good to get half (or less) as much. All the institutions along the loans-to-gifts spectrum—I'll use the term "funders" to encompass them

all—are “ivory towers,” by which I mean institutions of racism and division. All these funders exist to preserve the wealth and privilege of a few, to separate them from the rest of us. Most employ money in the name of division, to reinforce fear, greed, and envy.

Now, some will say that’s “just the economy, stupid:” the natural outcome of an ideology that puts the welfare of the free market and the rights of corporations before the welfare and rights of people. But I say that those who would focus the blame on the system of capitalism or neoliberalism are obscuring the real root of the problem. As Malcolm X said: “You can’t have capitalism without racism.”²

Since at least the 1400s, White supremacy has been the justification for colonization, the conquest and exploitation of non-European lands, backed by a claim of divine sanction. European White imperialism spent centuries marching around the world, using whatever means necessary to amass and consolidate resources and wealth. Now, adding insult to injury, those who were stolen from or exploited to make that wealth— Indigenous people, people of African descent, and many other people of color— must apply for access to that wealth in the form of loans or grants; we must prove ourselves worthy. We are demeaned for our lack of resources, scrutinized, and often denied access after all.

The tactics of colonization violate us and leave us traumatized, over generations, to this very day.

Yet there’s a silver lining in this cataclysm. All of us who have been forced to the margins are the very ones who harbor the best solutions for healing, progress and peace, by virtue of our outsider perspectives and resilience. When we reclaim our share of resources,

² Malcolm X, “The Harlem ‘Hate-Gang’ Scare”, *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder, 1989), p. 68-69. Answer to a question during the question period following his speech at the Militant Labor Forum held in New York on May 29, 1964.

when we recover our places at the table and the drawing board, we can design our healing. We can create new ways of seeking and granting access to money. We can return balance to the world by moving money to where the hurt is worst.

To paraphrase Maya Angelou: Once we know better, we need to do better.