

Title: "Reconcilable Differences?: Philanthropy, Decolonization, and Existing While Indigenous"

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# Reconcilable Differences?: Philanthropy, Decolonization, and Existing While Indigenous

By Justin Wiebe

*This article is the first in a renewed collaboration between The Philanthropist and The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. The goal is to highlight Indigenous philanthropy and share Indigenous perspective and wisdom on reciprocity as well as Indigenous-focused work happening in the philanthropic community.*

As a Métis person who grew up on my homelands in Saskatoon, I really didn't know what philanthropy was until I started working in it. I never could have imagined visiting a Manhattan skyscraper to talk to some Lumbee guy from North Carolina about philanthropy. Despite that, there was still something weirdly comforting (and exciting) about making my way up the elevator to meet Edgar Villanueva, author of *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*. We'd never met before, but in true millennial fashion, I sent him a direct message on Twitter and asked if he'd be available for a meeting, and in true Indigenous fashion, he said "of course." After I offered Edgar some tobacco, we shared a few laughs and started talking about philanthropy, decolonization, and what it's like being an Indigenous person today.

**Justin Wiebe: Who are you? Where are you from? How did you get here?**

**Edgar Villanueva:** I love that question. In my community, the first thing we say when meeting a new person is "who's your people?" My name is Edgar and I am enrolled member of the Lumbee Tribe in North Carolina. We are the largest tribe east of the Mississippi River. We're not federally recognized, but in 1950 we were state recognized by the Lumbee Act. Our struggle over the past 50 years has been for parity in our recognition. There was an amazing story in the *Washington Post* recently that made me weep because of how accurate it was in telling the story of my people. I wrote a letter to the editor in response to this article that adds more to the story of my people.

I'm southern, I'm Native and I come from a family, like most Native families, that is poor and very closely connected to each other, place, and culture. Like most people, I ended up in the non-profit and philanthropy space by happenstance. I always felt a calling to give back and to help because I had

received support and guidance as a young person. Surprising to some, the church is a very big part of my tribe's culture and that's where my journey started. I went to seminary after high school, but quickly realized that the church wasn't my path. I came back to North Carolina and started working at a non-profit fighting for public health advocacy issues. It was through that work that I got more politicized and realized that I needed to learn more, so I went back to school to study public health.

When I graduated I was recruited by a health foundation. I was 28-years-old and had no idea what philanthropy was. I had a multi-million dollar portfolio and all I knew was that my job was to get the funds out the door to support low-income communities. That's how I ended up in philanthropy. I quickly got interested in questions like: how does philanthropy work? Who holds power? Who makes decisions? And who even has access to philanthropic dollars? These are the questions that I've grappled with over the years that pushed me to eventually write *Decolonizing Wealth*.

**Honestly, what's your perspective on philanthropy? What does it offer us? What are its limitations?**

What I truly hope for is to live in a society where philanthropy no longer exists. Philanthropy as an institutionalized system, as it is currently working, isn't necessarily something I believe in for long-term sustainability of communities. Fundamentally, we need to make changes in economic policy so that no one can acquire such massive amounts of wealth. I think the origins of philanthropy are actually pretty problematic. The wealth being held by foundations is twice stolen, first from Indigenous folks, Black people, and People of Colour through genocide, slavery, and exploitation; and second after this wealth was accumulated it's been put in tax sheltered foundations rather than being used to support Indigenous people, People of Colour, and programs and services that the public needs.

For whatever reasons, I've ended up in this space as someone who is far from who is intended to be here. I believe in incremental change, and although I frequently question why I am here, I do believe that money has been my medicine. Money itself is neutral, and the problems lie in the intention behind how money is used and the barriers that limit who has access to it. My calling is to be inside this system and find ways to disrupt and reshape how we move money and find ways to utilize money to help heal the trauma that exists because of how wealth has historically been accumulated. We need to work towards economic justice and make radical changes to policies, taxation, and economic systems to create a more fair society.

**The philanthropic sector is filled with good intentions, what role do you think being upfront and honest about where funders resources comes from plays in working towards equity?**

A lot of folks are thinking about reconciliation, but we need *truth* and reconciliation. I often find that very intelligent people don't know the true history of this place; they don't realize that many of the policies in the United States were constructed around race and used to separate and divide the haves and have-nots. Communities of colour have often been restricted from accessing resources available to white folks. For funders, you must racialize the issue you're trying to tackle. You must understand the history and context of the issue you care about and remember that racial disparities must be considered in every situation. That's how this country was founded: we created race and then created systems and policies that reinforce that ideology. As funders, we must take the time to understand how those systems and history impact the problems we're trying to solve today. Too many funders are colour-blind and focus on equality, of course equality is a good thing, but it means everyone gets the same thing. When you begin to racialize your problem and understand the geography, history, and policies

then equality doesn't feel like the right solution to resourcing – you realize that equity is better suited. Equity is about justice and shifting power and ownership, it means some people – those historically marginalized – might get more than others to make things right.

For anyone wanting to be an effective funder or investor, you have to take a long look in the mirror and ask yourself 'What have I done to perpetuate the system as it is?' and 'What can I be doing differently to repair the wrong that has been done?' Philanthropy has played a role in perpetuating harmful systems. It's easy for us to be self-righteous and not remember that we are inherently connected to capitalism and those systems that have created inequality. We need to ask ourselves, 'How can we reverse those systems from the place we sit?'

**When we're investing in communities who have been the most marginalized and the most oppressed, the impact that we're going to see out of that far exceeds what you'd see when investing in a community that has access to resources.**

I think of money as medicine – for me that means moving money to where the hurt is felt the worst and when you put money where the hurt is worst, you have the greatest opportunity for significant impact. What folks often don't understand is that universal approaches to challenges can exclude and not positively impact people of colour. Instead, if you target your solution to the most marginalized population, that will help everyone. This is a conversation that I've had so often with people over the past few years, people are focused on particular issues or populations, but when you bring race and ethnicity to the table, all of a sudden, it's like you're not focusing on the particular issue or population anymore. For example, if you're focused on improving outcomes for women and girls and are intentional about supporting interventions for women and girls of colour, that's going to help all women. However, strategies that are targeted at the middle class or white women are not likely to support or benefit women of colour. That's why I encourage people to move money where the hurt is the worst.

**We need to have an intersectional analysis in the work we do. The potential for change is huge when we bring that to our work. Your book is coming out soon, and so, through all the research you've done and your own experience as an Indigenous person, what does our knowledge, expertise, and culture have to offer to creating a more equitable society?**

So much! Firstly, I'm using this book to help generate more investment into Indigenous communities and even the proceeds from the book go to a fund to support Indigenous youth organizing. The message of the book is not 'we're so poor, please come help us,' rather it is about showcasing the Indigenous worldview and solutions that funders should know about. It's about recognizing that those who are the most marginalized or close to a problem have the best solutions.

The word resilient is thrown around a lot, and to me, who is more resilient than our people? Despite everything, we're still here holding onto what is sacred for us. Any group of people who are still able to exist after all that we've been through, must have a secret sauce. The way that we care for one another, and the values we have about community are almost non-existent in the philanthropic sector. Which is very strange because philanthropy means "love of humankind." When I was writing the book, I spent a lot of time talking to Indigenous elders and one of the first questions I would ask is, 'how do you define philanthropy?' And obviously they responded with 'what is that? I've never heard of it. How do you spell it?' The idea that I am up here on some pedestal writing a cheque for people down there. That sort of transactional, linear connection is not a great way to do philanthropy. Our values of reciprocity,

being in relationship, caring for you because I know that you would do the same for me when I need it would truly transform philanthropy.

**Is there anything else you'd like to share? Important work you'd like to amplify?**

I'd like to give a shout out to The Potlatch Fund in Seattle. It's an Indigenous-led organization that provides grants and leadership development in tribal communities. The word potlatch comes from a tradition in that region that is all about wealth redistribution. As tribes accumulated more harvest than was needed, it was a celebration to redistribute that surplus to others – their leadership were measured not by how much they accumulated, but rather by how much they gave away. In philanthropy today, we don't approach things in this way. Instead, we are wired to think about how much we've accumulated, and how we can grow that wealth, rather than focusing on how much we can give away. In the US, the 5% Foundation payout requirement was intended to be the minimum a foundation gave away, but instead that's become the maximum for most. There's more emphasis on growing the endowments rather than giving money away.

Important concepts like resiliency, reciprocity, and being in relationship with one another are critical things that the philanthropic sector needs to understand. They also need to understand healing. As Indigenous people we often want to bring the oppressor into our circle. The Lakota principle of 'all of our suffering is mutual, all of our thriving is mutual' speaks to how interrelated we see things. I think all these values can be applied to philanthropy. There is so much pain and trauma that philanthropy has contributed to, and all of us are hurting in different ways because of the system that we're living in. So, I think there's an opportunity to learn about and utilize Indigenous traditions of restorative justice, healing, and how can we fund those models to bring the balance back to this country that we need. I believe that we need to begin with acknowledging each other's pain, and realize the enemy is not you or I – it's white supremacy and systems that aren't working for everyone, including white people.