

# The Southeast Working-Class Task Force January 2020 Newsletter

## De-colonizing Wealth

On Jan 30, Southeast Working-Class Task Force members Michael and Kristin Smith and John Harris Loflin attended the talk by Edgar Villanueva of the Schott Foundation about his book *Decolonizing Wealth Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*

<https://www.decolonizingwealth.com/>

“Make no mistake, the exploitation of our democratic-capitalist system is intentional. Too often, the powerful and privileged who might stem the callousness and corruption seem largely to ignore it, avoid it, minimize it or, worst of all, maximize it for their own gain.”

— Darren Walker | President, Ford Foundation

What we learned:

- 16% THE AMOUNT THE U.S. GDP WOULD INCREASE BY 2030 IF THE RACIAL EARNINGS GAP WAS CLOSED

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation's 2018 *The Business Case for Racial Equity* states if the average incomes of people of color were raised to the average incomes of whites, total U.S. earnings would increase by 12%, representing nearly \$1 trillion today.

People of color make up 37% of the working age population now, but they are projected to grow to 46% by 2030, and 55% by 2050. Closing the earnings gap by 2030 would increase GDP by 16%.

- <8% PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

Less than 8% of philanthropic support goes towards investing in communities of color.

*Decolonizing Wealth* aims to drive a national conversation to help close this gap and advance racial and economic equity. This will transform how money is used by philanthropy and finance to better serve the needs of Indigenous people and communities of color.

*Decolonizing Wealth* is a provocative analysis of the dysfunctional colonial dynamics at play in philanthropy and finance. Edgar Villanueva drew from the traditions from the Native way to prescribe the medicine for restoring balance and healing our divides.

Though it seems counterintuitive, the philanthropic industry has evolved to mirror colonial structures and reproduces hierarchy, ultimately doing more harm than good. After 14 years in philanthropy, Edgar has seen past the field's glamorous, altruistic façade, and into its shadows:

- the old boy networks,
- the savior complexes, and the internalized oppression among the "house slaves,"
- and those select few people of color who gain access.

All these funders reflect and perpetuate the same underlying dynamics that divide Us from Them and the haves from have-nots.

With great compassion--because the Native way is to bring the oppressor into the circle of healing--Villanueva is able to both diagnose the fatal flaws in philanthropy and provide thoughtful solutions to these systemic imbalances. *Decolonizing Wealth* is a timely and critical book that preaches for mutually assured liberation in which we are all inter-connected.

In equal measure, Edgar denounced the reproduction of systems of oppression while also advocating for an orientation towards justice to open the floodgates for a rising tide that lifts all boats. In the third and final section, Villanueva offers radical provocations to funders and outlines his Seven Steps for Healing.

He identified the harm philanthropy causes, and continues to cause, to people of color. For one thing, a large portion of foundation dollars originally come from excess wealth extracted from Indigenous land and slave labor. Now, philanthropy grants a slim percentage of those dollars to Black and Indigenous communities and communities of color, despite these communities needing it the most.

Even so, Villanueva doesn't consider money inherently bad. He believes money has the potential to be "medicine" – to heal the wounds it's inflicted. He proposed 7 steps for a healing process.

- grieve
- apologize
- listen
- relate
- represent
- invest
- repair

These steps won't always be linear, Villanueva cautions. And, people of color can't leave their oppressors behind. It's not possible to heal without everyone.

Decolonizing Wealth is both practical and optimistic. Villanueva's steps aren't revolutionary. He doesn't call for anyone to destroy existing institutions. His vision for decolonization is a "both/and" process. It combines the "traditional way" and the "colonizers' way" (104).

## 7 Steps

Steps 1&2 Grieve and apologize, ask folks to own up to histories that have been hidden in the closet, gathering dust. For example, many philanthropic organizations in the Pacific Northwest acquired their assets through timber harvested from Indigenous land. Per Villanueva, the Indigenous people displaced from this land and the people who profited, and continue to profit, off the stolen timber all need to grieve. Furthermore, the descendants of the people who stole that timber should apologize to the people they stole it from.

Steps 3 & 4, listen and relate, are about building respect and relationships. Philanthropists needs to listen deeply and meet people where they are; get to know them, learn from them, and value their humanity. This I wholeheartedly agree with. I would add, philanthropists must approach listening and relating openly, with a willingness to accept anger and distrust and to be called out on mistakes. Steps five through seven are game-changers. They demand action.

Step 5: "At least half of the people who make the decisions about where money goes . . . should have intimate, authentic knowledge of the issues and communities involved" (147). Yes, and, to me, this isn't ambitious enough. White people have held the clear majority of decision-making positions since we settled in this country. At this point, purely reflective democracy won't balance the scales. People of color need to be overrepresented in decision-making positions to make up for the last few centuries.

Step 6: "Assets must be 100 percent mission-aligned" (157). There is so much possibility in this statement. If philanthropic organizations divest hundreds of billions of dollars from coal, oil, and corporations and reinvest in clean energy, small businesses, education, etc., that alone could rectify so many wrongs.

Step 7: "Reparations are due" (160). Villanueva presents a few examples of how reparations might be made. One example: every philanthropic organization contributes 10 percent of its wealth to a pooled fund for Native and African American-led asset-building projects. This suggestion is also full of possibility.

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The January 2020 newsletter is a compilation of ideas and quotes from:

- <https://www.amazon.com/Decolonizing-Wealth-Indigenous-Divides-Restore/dp/1523097892>
- <https://www.discursiveimpulse.com/book-review-decolonizing-wealth/>

The SEW-CTF newsletter is edited by task force Chair John Harris Loflin ([john.loflin@seindy.org](mailto:john.loflin@seindy.org)). The task force meets the 3rd Wednesday of the month from 6:30-8:00 in the McDonald's at 2830 Madison Ave 46225