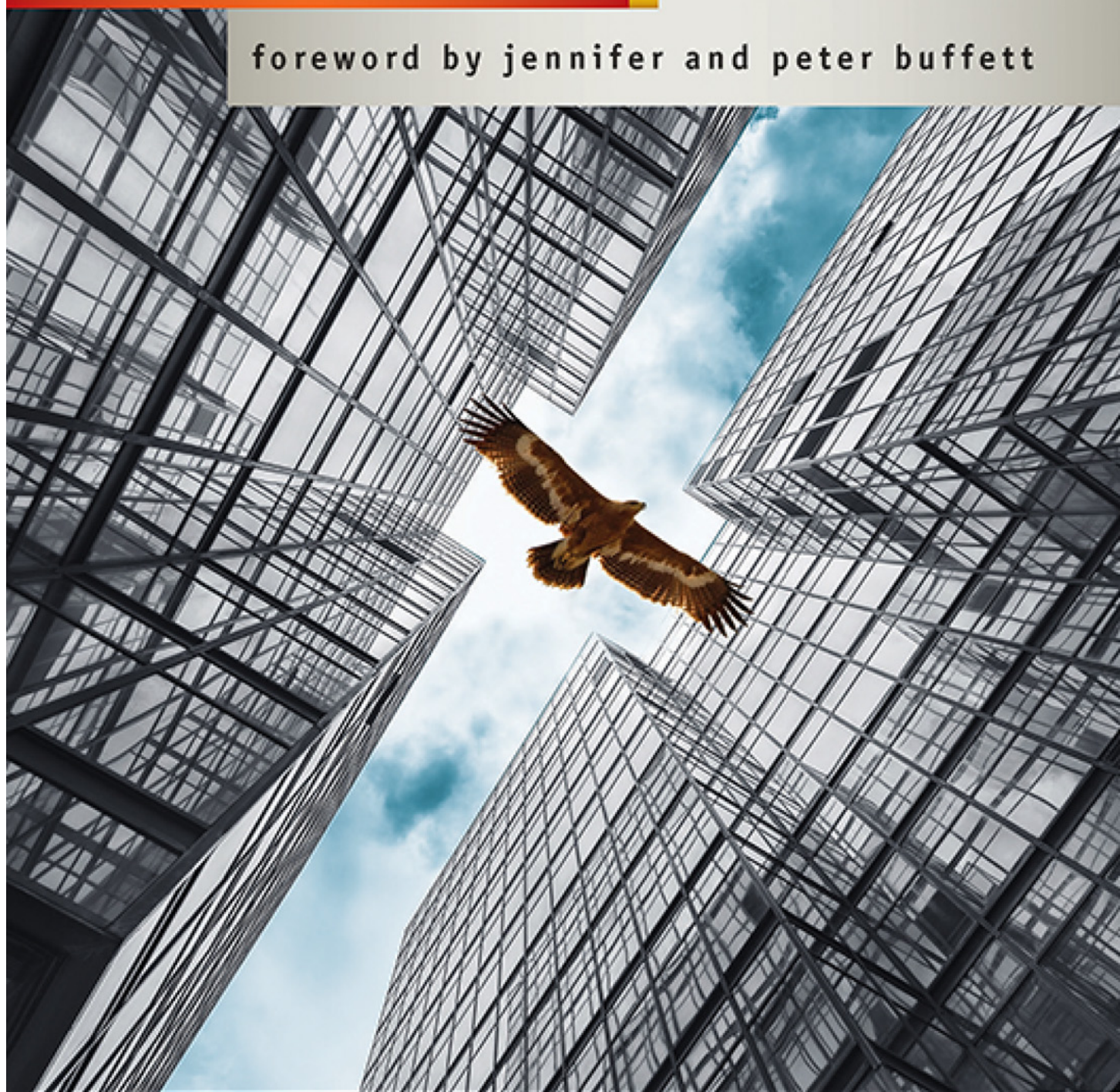


edgar villanueva

foreword by jennifer and peter buffett



DECOLONIZING

WEALTH

indigenous wisdom  
to heal divides and  
restore balance



## **Praise for *Decolonizing Wealth***

“By anchoring the solutions to America’s ills in the wisdom and knowledge of its original people, Edgar challenges all of us to analyze how our nation’s history of racism and disenfranchisement has infected its financial and giving institutions.”

—**Heather McGhee, Distinguished Senior Fellow, Demos**

“*Decolonizing Wealth* offers a refreshing and inspired look at how wealth can better serve the needs of communities of color and atone for the ways in which it has traditionally been used to inflict harm and division.”

—**Kevin Jennings, President, Tenement Museum**

“Edgar has gone out on a limb to help lead us to a place of healing. He bravely calls out the power dynamics within the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors, particularly the white supremacy institutionally embedded into the system of nonprofit supplicant and philanthropic largesse.”

—**Kathy Ko Chin, President and CEO, Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum**

“Finally, a Native perspective on how to heal internal systemic challenges. *Decolonizing Wealth* not only is an unflinching examination of today’s philanthropic institutions and the foundations upon which they were built but also offers critical wisdom applicable to many sectors.”

—**Sarah Eagle Heart (Lakota), CEO, Native Americans in Philanthropy**

“Edgar reinserts purpose and humanity into a philanthropic industry that has too often been driven by wealth accumulation, grant cycles, portfolios, and metrics.”

—**John H. Jackson, President and CEO, Schott Foundation for Public Education**

“If you want to know how funders can redeem our souls, this book is a critical step in the right direction. Edgar is a courageous voice shaping a new era of activist grantmaking, one centered on achieving, not just studying opportunity and racial equity.”

—**Eric K. Ward, philanthropist and Executive Director, Western States Center**

“Edgar’s voice will help shape the future of a philanthropy that systematically reverses the toxic inequalities that threaten the very fabric of our human existence. It gives me hope for the soul of our sector.”

—**Pia Infante, Co-Executive Director, The Whitman Institute**

“Charity and philanthropy rarely offer meaningful challenges to systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. *Decolonizing Wealth* is an important contribution to the grassroots struggles to transform society and shift the way we think about our relationship with money.”

—**Jordan Flaherty, author of *No More Heroes***

“For charities and donors trying to shift the giving paradigm and channel resources in ways that are truly equitable, Edgar’s ideas for solutions—based on Indigenous culture and traditions—couldn’t come at a better time.”

—**Nan Aron, President, Alliance for Justice**

“*Decolonizing Wealth* offers an arrow to pierce the status quo. While the heart of the revolution for justice is not dependent on philanthropic support, there can be a powerfully effective role for mindful philanthropy to respectfully contribute to the reimagining and actualization of a more just world for future generations.”

—**Tia Oros Peters (Shiwi), Executive Director, Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples**

“Nothing is more important to decolonize than money—without it, change is slower and harder and comes too late for too many people. Edgar Villanueva is a fresh voice in the money scene, one we should all heed.”

—**Rinku Sen, author and strategist**

“Edgar has broken through the tired jargon of philanthropy-speak and written a fresh, honest, painful, and hopeful book, grounded in his own truths and Native traditions. He offers some radical thinking about what it would take to create a world in which power and accountability shifted and communities controlled the resources vital to their strength and futures.”

—**Gara LaMarche, President, Democracy Alliance; former President, Atlantic Philanthropies; and former Vice President and Director of US Programs, Open Society Foundations**

DECOLONIZING  
WEALTH

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# DECOLONIZING WEALTH

Indigenous Wisdom  
to Heal Divides and Restore Balance

Edgar Villanueva

Foreword by Jennifer and Peter Buffett



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.  
a BK Currents book

# Decolonizing Wealth

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*To the memory of my granddaddy, Johnson Lee Jacobs, Sr.,  
who created a path to spirituality for many  
and taught me the story of redemption.  
I hope I'm making you proud.*



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“If we are going to heal, let it be glorious.”  
—Beyoncé

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# Foreword

**F**ortunate, privileged, blessed—we had always known we were all of these things, but 2006 took things to another level.

That was the year that Warren Buffett, Peter's father, bestowed on us a gift that would eventually total billions of dollars, to fund charitable work of our choosing. Despite Peter's famous last name, this sum of money was far beyond anything either of us had ever fathomed, much less controlled.

It was a responsibility with a weight we had never known. It meant we were suddenly expected to have all the answers. It meant we were invited into conversations with heads of state, investment managers, corporate leaders, entrepreneurs, and other big philanthropists, the global ruling elite, an overwhelmingly white and male crowd. These were the people who held forth on innovation, solutions, and progress. These were the people entrusted with leadership, whom investors think of as strategic, from whom the world expects great things.

The more we heard, the more we realized that these rooms full of wealthy and powerful white men could not possess the wisdom we sought. Far too often, they were searching for answers with their right hand to problems that they had created or contributed to with their left.

Those who had benefited most from the system of wealth consolidation were seen as the experts and the saviors of those who had been exploited and harmed by it. But why? In our own experience, assuming control of

a vast amount of money had nothing to do with having all the answers. If there was one thing we were clear on, it was that we didn't have answers; all we could do was listen and practice humility. We devoted ourselves instead to an earnest search for fresh ideas that show unusual promise for significant impact.

Humility is something we could stand to see a lot more of among those of us who control the wealth of the world. Humility is not the same thing as modesty or false modesty. Humility is characterized by an accurate sense of self—assessing not just our weaknesses but also our privileges and strengths, being honest with ourselves about both. The root of the word is related to the soil, like the word “humus.” Humility literally means being close to the ground.

This is where we find expertise and solutions, too: close to the ground, close to experience. The communities who have direct experience of an issue are by far the best experts on it.

Two other things that are etymologically close to the ground are the *radical*, which comes from “root” and the *Indigenous*, which means to be native to a place or born of a place.

Edgar Villanueva brings together all three of these things—an Indigenous, Native American voice that is simultaneously humble and radical. When we first met Edgar, we knew his leadership and writing would be a key to unlocking the stranglehold that the broken capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial systems have on our deeply divided country. Edgar calls us to dig deeper for different ways of being, rooted in love of humanity and the earth.

Again and again he asks us here to imagine: *What if?*

“Even just asking the question opens us to radically different possible realities and can lead to healing, to a greater sense of dignity and purpose,” he writes.

*What if* we could use wealth to heal rather than cause further harm? *What if* funders, philanthropists, and entrepreneurs could help restore the earth? *What if* money was spent trying out concepts that shatter current structures and systems that have turned much of the world into one vast market?

Getting from “here” to “there” is rarely obvious or a straight line. But radical imagination—daring to ask *What if?*—is always part of the process.

Everything Edgar is saying feels fundamentally different—and fundamentally true. It is clear that his voice, and that of many other Native and marginalized leaders, illuminates a path forward, in the face of extreme inequality, violence, and greed.

Voices like Edgar’s remind us that progress and unity can be found by trusting in the deep wisdom of local communities, rather than chasing expertise from outside. It demonstrates that true healing, and lasting justice, won’t be discovered in the technological advancements of the future, but recovered in the time-tested wisdom found close to the ground. It offers the radical hope that money might be used as medicine, after all, to heal the trauma and wounds we all bear.

—Jennifer and Peter Buffett

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## INTRODUCTION

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# What if Money Could Heal Us

This is a book for people who direct the flow of money. The more money you direct, the more this book is for you. You may be a philanthropist, an investor, or a funds manager; you may work for a foundation, a bank, or a community. You may be an “ordinary person” interested in the money invested through your pension or insurance. You may think of yourself as wealthy; maybe you would never use that word. Across the board, according to the numbers, you’re more likely to be a white man, since more white men direct more of the flow of money.<sup>1</sup> But you may also be a woman, Black, brown, Indigenous, or anything else that is not a white man.

Whoever you are, you are welcome. As I will explain, in my own Native American belief system we are all relatives, literally all related to one another. We are also all infected with what I call the “colonizer virus,” which urges us to divide, control, and exploit. Nowhere is the virus more symptomatic than in how we deal with wealth.



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For some, reading this book may feel like I'm yanking off the Band-Aid. There may be moments of discomfort. I invite you to sit with it, in the understanding that I am motivated by love, and that things have been just as uncomfortable, if not really painful, for many of us, for a very long time.

In order to heal what hurts, to come back together as one human race, and to restore balance to the land, we need to decolonize wealth. This book will explain how we can begin to heal ourselves, using money as our medicine.



\$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. They hail from Robeson County, North Carolina, the third poorest county in the United States, 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 percent of my income—the average annual percentage given as donations by the super-wealthy<sup>2</sup>—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.



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.

It is (we are) like a mansion with neoclassical 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