
Caring for Each Other:

PHILANTHROPY IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

BY LISA DURÁN

Philanthropy in communities of color has historically gone unrecognized. In fact, many assume the relationship between philanthropists and ethnic communities is one of giving to people of color by people who are not. The majority of studies about philanthropy in America have focused on elite philanthropy, that is, the philanthropy of affluent white donors. These views are erroneous, a form of stereotyping, and at worst they perpetuate a subtle form of racism that continues to disempower communities of color in relation to whites.

In fact, philanthropy in communities of color has a long and vibrant history in the United States. Its form has been shaped by traditions of immigrant homelands and the experiences of minorities as they have had to struggle together to survive. It is crucial to publicize these histories in order to help re-construct communities of color as givers, not only receivers, and as important shapers of our society. Understanding the different ways that giving practices are culturally embedded should help to foster understanding and mutual respect.

Up to now, definitions of philanthropy have been dominated by a view that emphasized “charity,” the detachment of professionalism, the benefits of tax deduction, and giving through charitable institutions. An examination of the ways communities of color give demonstrates that there is ample room for re-shaping this view to be more aware, inclusive, less detached, and respectful of difference.

People of color are philanthropists, whether philanthropy is defined as giving through what is called “institutional philanthropy” — that is, money given to established charities — or as giving goods and services outside the nuclear family without any apparent expectation of economic return. Traditional definitions of philanthropy have tended to focus on giving money, but newer views also include the giving of time, shelter, or other material resources as philanthropic activities. This definition allows for a broader conception of philanthropic behavior. I have reviewed the literature of philanthropy among communities of color and have found a vital philanthropic history with elements in common. Some of the commonalities

spring from the experience of being people of color in a U.S. society still tainted by white supremacy; some from the common experience of immigration.

AFRICAN AMERICANS

Perhaps the best-documented historical cases of philanthropy in communities of color have occurred in African-American communities, beginning in the colonial era with the founding of black churches, fraternal orders and mutual aid societies. These included the Fraternal Order of Prince Hall Masons (1775), Boston’s Sons of Africa Society (1788) and the African Union Society (1781). These institutions provided support and aid to blacks, providing places to worship, pensions for widows, and aid to the poor. Many also worked to abolish slavery. They were so effective that several states established laws to ban fraternal organizations and mutual aid societies. The history of African-American philanthropy includes many organizations whose purpose was three-fold: *humanitarian*, as aid to ameliorate suffering; *self-help*, emphasizing black schools, colleges, hospitals and insurance companies; and *social change*, fighting for the abolition of slavery and later to end barriers to racial equality.

Black churches have been critical in the development and support of philanthropic behavior among African Americans. Gratitude for their role and a sense of self-determination result in broad support among African Americans, since the church is a community-rooted, black-run institution, historically controlled by its own, and one of the few that have not abandoned the inner city. In 1995 churches received two-thirds of black charitable dollars; more recent figures put black giving to churches at the slightly lower rate of 60% (on a par with the overall population), as African Americans begin making gifts to non-traditional charities, such as scholarship and creative writing programs.

Other organizations, including women’s clubs and Greek societies, have also served as both recipients and sources of philanthropy in the African-American community. One example is the Mother Society of New York, which supported black women in that city in the 19th

century. *Freedom's Journal*, a black newspaper published in the early 1800s, estimated in 1829 that there were only 43 poor black women in New York, compared with 472 poor white women, largely as a result of the Society's work. The National Association of Colored Women, whose membership in 1916 was 50,000, with 1,000 chapters in 28 states, also provided philanthropy in the form of support for the war effort during World War I, despite the sharp increase in lynchings during that time.

Longstanding oppression has encouraged blacks to develop what one author calls a "communal tradition of caring for each other." Even during difficult times, the less fortunate have been supported in that community. This support has come from wealthy and well-known African Americans who made great fortunes, such as Madame C.J. Walker, the first black woman millionaire, who supported a number of educational and other aid projects in the early 20th century; Bill and Camille Cosby, who donated \$20 million to Spelman University in the early 1990s; or singer Ray Charles, who recently donated \$2 million to Wilberforce University, a private black college in Ohio. But it has also come from people like Oseola McCarty, the legendary laundry woman who, through a life of humble labor, saved enough to donate \$150,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi in 1995; or Matel Dawson, Jr., an autoworker who, over the course of his lifetime, has given \$1 million to local charities.

Although these large contributions often stir greater notice, trends of giving within the African-American community show that its members have always been frequent and customary givers. Studies of giving show extensive informal networks of support, such as when mothers send their children to the neighbors to collect quarters for those in need, or when African Americans work to meet the high expectations of their communities for mutual support and to "give back" to their communities.

Obviously, this information conflicts with the view of African Americans as primarily recipients of charity. Indeed, there is disagreement about the extent of giving in the African-American community. The Independent Sector, a highly respected organization that tracks giving and volunteering in the United States, reported in 1996 that 53% of blacks surveyed gave compared with 73% of whites. They gave three reasons for lower black (and Hispanic) giving: a much lower average household income than whites; a lower percentage of married respondents; and a much lower proportion with college degrees. Other studies found that, despite differences in income, blacks, Hispanics, and whites were equally likely to make charitable contributions and that the sizes of their contributions were about the same. The Carson finding is especially noteworthy because of differences not only in income, but in net worth, or assets.

For example, white families in the U.S. with annual income of less than \$15,000 are nevertheless likely to have net worth of \$10,000; black families with the same income, however, show a median net worth of zero or negative (debt). At the other end of the income scale, white families with incomes of \$75,000 show a median net worth of \$140,200, while a black family with the same income has a net worth of \$54,000. Despite this widening wealth gap, African Americans at all income levels continue to make contributions.

Finally, it should be noted that African-American philanthropy has always been linked with social justice, so that groups may well provide charity for down-and-out families while at the same time they were fighting for suffrage, the abolition of slavery, against lynching, or for equal rights.

LATINOS

Philanthropy in other communities of color is not so well researched, but these communities also have long histories of philanthropic behavior. The Mexican-American community is one example. Since the U.S.-Mexican War ended in 1848, there has been a flow of Mexican immigrants to the southwestern United States who joined long-established Mexican-American communities in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and California. These communities created *mutualista* (mutual aid) organizations designed to help newcomers get settled, provide burial plans, or to serve as a community insurance pool, as well as fight against the racism they encountered. They also served as preservers of social networks, with some regularly sponsoring fiestas and dances. They have played key roles in supporting the less fortunate in their communities and in fighting against segregation, for suffrage, and for better schools and conditions in Mexican-American communities. Though these *mutualistas* existed up to the 1960s, they have historically escaped the notice of scholars studying institutional philanthropy.

Latinos tend to give informally, through familial or social networks. In these communities, both the poor and the emerging middle class give in large numbers, particularly in response to specific events such as hurricanes or earthquakes in Latin America, pressing community needs, or important family occasions. Though much of this philanthropy falls below levels that could be recorded on tax returns, the Latino community in America is also developing its star donors, such as Alberto Vilar, a Cuban-born investor who recently donated \$50 million to the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

The element of *personalismo* is key when Latinos decide where to give: knowledge of the recipient is more likely to result in a gift. Especially among those who themselves immigrated, helping others get settled in the U.S.

can include offering shelter, food, clothing, and work recommendations for as long as necessary. These recipients of charity may or may not be family members.

Remittances to family members or communities out of the country also account for a large portion of giving. In many cases, Latino immigrants send more than 10% of their earnings back to their families and home villages. One estimate is that remittances to Mexico total as much as \$4 billion a year, providing Mexico's second-largest source of foreign income after oil. Workers' remittances help pay for such things as church renovations, village wells, and roads as well as family necessities. Much of the giving by Guatemalans and Salvadorans is also through remittances to their homelands.

As with African Americans, the church is a recipient of the most significant portion of institutional giving by Latinos. Previously, this would have been largely limited to the Catholic Church, but fundamentalist Protestant denominations have increasingly attracted Latinos to their practice and to giving. Special events, especially with religious significance, such as baptisms, *quinceañeras*, and weddings provide other opportunities for giving. Perhaps because of the long history of discrimination against Spanish-speaking immigrants, Latinos also tie some of their philanthropic activity to social justice. One study shows that organizational membership and philanthropic engagement are strongly linked to political participation, especially among Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans.

ASIANS

Giving among American Indians and Asians appears even less well documented. This may be attributable to the relative size of these populations on a national scale, or it may reflect the way traditional philanthropic research has ignored ethnic communities to focus on the more numerous white givers. The frequently cited Independent Sector's biennial study, *Giving and Volunteering in the United States*, does not include these populations in their demographic categories. Still, work has been done to illuminate their philanthropic histories.

Among the diverse Asian communities, giving patterns share some similarities to Latino giving, perhaps because of the immigrant base of these communities. (Of course, to speak of Asians implies a homogeneity among the Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Southeast Asian, South Asian or Pacific Islander populations that in fact have diverse languages, cultures, traditions, and religious bases. However, some generalizations have been made about Asian giving practices.)

As among Latinos, Asians in the U.S. give more informally, give when there is a personal connection to a cause

or an organization, and give to help newcomers settle in this country. Mutual aid societies have been an important part of the histories of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino communities in America. Korean- and Vietnamese-American associations exist as well. In addition, immigrant families provide billions of dollars in remittances to families in their home countries, with estimates that Filipino Americans remit up to \$6.4 billion each year, Bangladeshis \$1.6 billion, and Vietnamese-Americans \$500 million annually. The practice of *balikbayan* among Filipinos, that is, bringing gifts when people return to the Philippines to visit their families, is another important form of philanthropy. So important was this income that the Marcos regime set up government programs to offer benefits to the givers.

For Koreans and Japanese, a large amount of giving is tied to religious practice, especially Christianity and Buddhism, respectively. Religious teachings of compassion, service to others, and the relatedness of all things make giving for these groups integral to everyday life; philanthropy, as such, is not considered a separate activity. Chinese communities have a venerable history of political giving, established in the early part of the 20th century. One study found that political factions within the Chinese community were very skilled at getting donations for their causes. While much of Asian giving, particularly among the more recently arrived, is ethnic-specific, a consistent finding is that Asian-Americans give to both ethnic-specific and non-Asian causes. Studies have also consistently found that Asians can be characterized as "substantial givers," giving more than 2.5% of their household income to charity.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE U.S.

An important theme in giving practices among the American Indian peoples of the United States is the role that culture plays in their philanthropy. In traditional Native-American societies, giving is a form of sharing, not charity, that "bonds you within the group, because you have provided a series of gifts that allow the group to prosper," says one indigenous philanthropist. The focus is on the exchange and the relationship of the giver and receiver in the larger context of community. This differs from traditional philanthropic practices that tend to separate individuals from their settings.

As with other cultures, Native Americans practice much informal giving within family and community. Specifically, Native American practices such as giveaways and potlaches reflect the regional and local characteristics of the more than 200 language groups of the indigenous peoples of the U.S.

Native Americans also support tribal foundations and tribal giving programs, as well as non-tribal funds. One study found that tribes that are more traditional tend to

consider the cultural and spiritual relevance of their giving more important than do more progressive tribes. The latter consider education, the arts, economic development, and entertainment as important causes for which to give. As with other groups, givers like to know the group or individual to which they are giving, but they often prefer to keep their gifts anonymous.

Differences in philanthropy among the Indian peoples of the United States may vary according to whether a donor is giving from wealth through tribal rather than individual means. Tribal vehicles for giving include tribal councils, tribal enterprises, tribal government, inter-tribal consortia, and foundations. Reservation-based individuals show differences in giving when compared with those who live off the reservation. They tend to support tribally sponsored charities, the needs of individual tribal members, educational scholarships, and sports activities, while non-reservation-based individuals were found to support historical and cultural projects, human services, and church-related activities.

NEW WEALTH IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

A common story among all communities of color is the growth of their middle classes. This growth provides opportunities for new forms of philanthropy. As communities live out longer histories, they make a significant step from “survival” and need-based strategies of giving, often done on an emergency basis, to giving from a concern with “legacy,” motivated by desires to help improve the quality of life in one’s community. This shift creates important questions about the ways that communities will choose to manage their giving as they accrue wealth.

One notable form of this new giving is the much-touted “intergenerational transfer of wealth,” that is, wealth that will be donated from the estates of aging baby boomers. The sheer size of this wealth transfer, estimated to be on the order of \$10 trillion (or \$6 trillion after applicable taxes), over perhaps as long as 55 years, represents a new order of opportunity for the recipients of this largess. The demographic of the givers signals that the giving will likely look different than traditional philanthropy. While there is no racial breakdown of where this money will come from, some of it will surely reflect the expanding upper and middle classes of communities of color.

Another form this wealth is taking is that of community funds. Local funds are being established as an alternative to federated funds such as the United Way in order to capture wealth from working people in the community and to ensure that those funds will be spent in that community. In particular, many community funds started because mainstream funds and banking institutions were not adequately serving communities of color. While the

oldest of these is the National Black United Fund (NBUF), community funds also exist in the Latino, Asian, and Native American communities.

An issue unique to American Indian community funds is the perception by the larger community that the growth of gaming on reservations means that indigenous peoples no longer need assistance. However, only a few tribes have eradicated poverty with gaming income, and many tribes do not have the option of establishing gaming. In fact, according to one report, despite the presence of gaming among some Indian tribes, poverty has increased on nine of the 10 largest reservations that house half of the Native American population in the United States. Still, the new wealth generated by gaming has resulted in new grants to improve the lives of game hosts’ tribes.

CONCLUSION

A little digging reveals the depth and breadth of historical giving in communities of color. As we become more familiar with that history, we find lessons in self-sufficiency and self-determination that we can apply to current experiences. We come once more to appreciate the great sacrifices our predecessors made when they gave generously of their substance, not just their surplus, to help their communities and families have a better future. **GF**

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Further Reading

THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES PROVIDED MUCH OF THE MATERIAL FOR THIS ARTICLE:

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