

What are Fictions of American Philanthropy?

Historians have studied the emergence of philanthropy as a specifically American phenomenon, defined by **open-ended largesse** in contrast to small-scale, direct, individually-focused charity. American Philanthropy served as a **foundational fiction of “doing good”** that re-cast robber-barons-turned-philanthropists as social reformers. Mark Twain’s novel *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873) named the period from the 1870s through the 1890s in reference to the glitter of concentrated wealth that masked extreme inequalities. Twain describes “benevolent schemes” of philanthropy as a veneer meant to conceal the era’s corrupt machine politics. 19th- and 20th-century writers across the Americas represent philanthropy as a critical function of a U.S.- dominated hemispheric order.



Berryman Political Cartoon Collection, Library of Congress

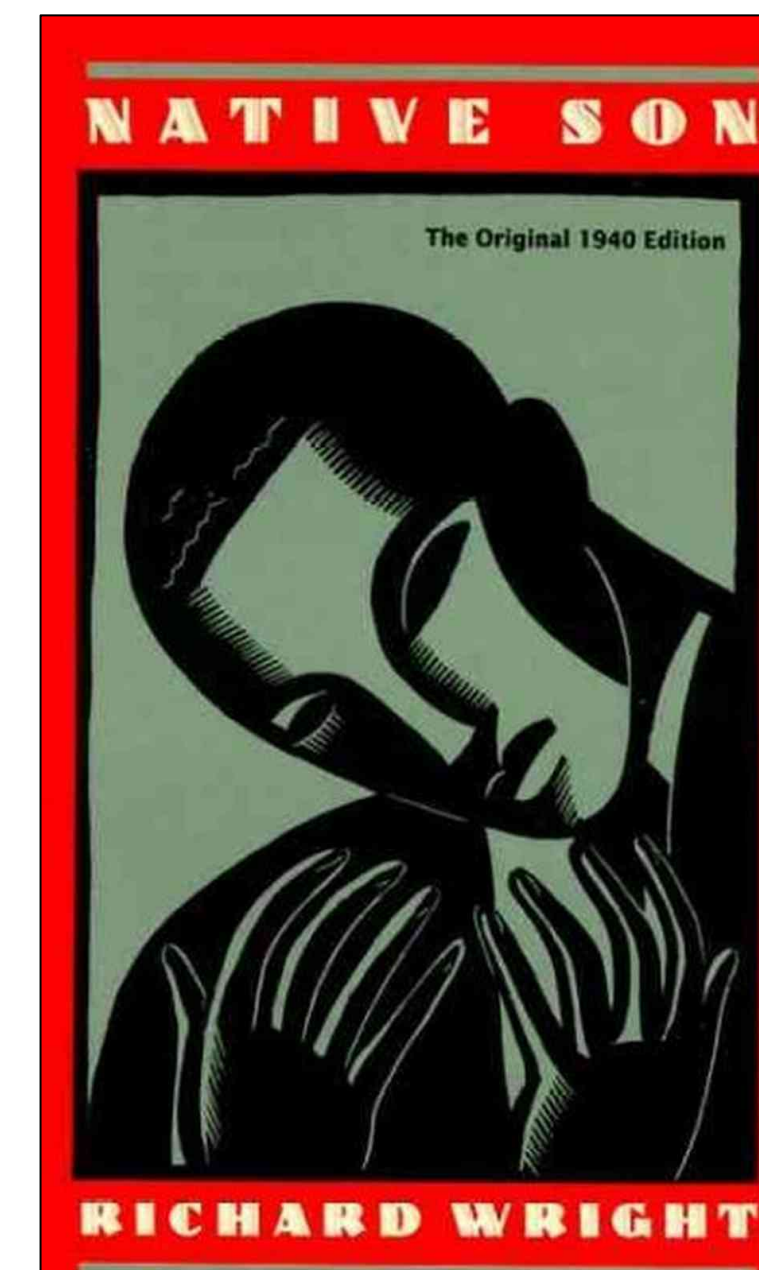
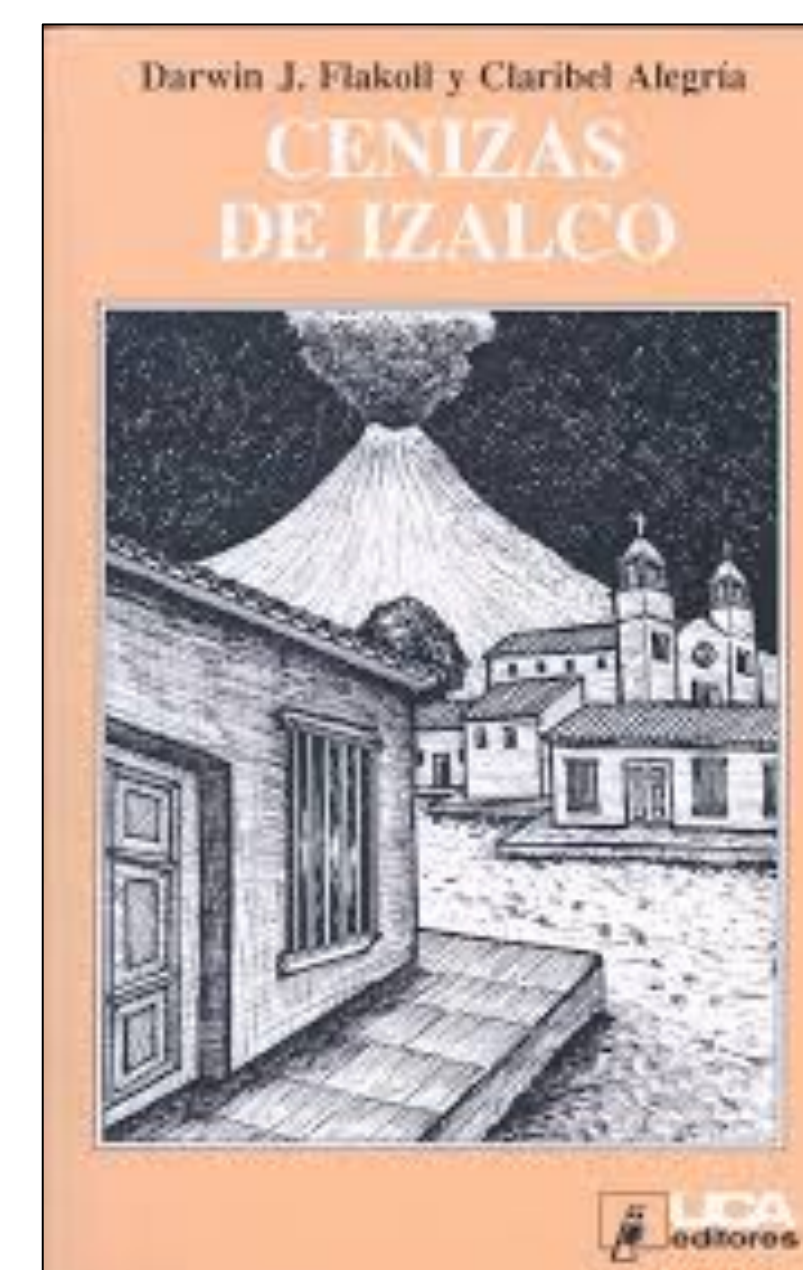
Alternative Histories from Below



Sidewalk plaque in honor of Mary Ellen Pleasant at 1661 Octavia Street, San Francisco, CA

Philanthropy in Fiction:

- **Free Enterprise: A Story of Mary Ellen Pleasant (1993)** by Michelle Cliff tells the little-known story of black feminist abolitionist and entrepreneur Mary Ellen Pleasant who gave \$30,000 to fund the raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859.
- **Native Son (1940)** by Richard Wright traces the origins of the philanthropic wealth to Jim Crow segregation and the impoverishment of the Chicago ghetto.
- **The Green Pope (El Papa Verde, 1954)** by Miguel Ángel Asturias represents three different kinds of philanthropy as divisive and/or galvanizing forces in a Guatemalan community struggling against multinational corporate expansion.
- **Ashes of Izalco (Cenizas de Izalco, 1966)** by Claribel Alegria imagines the relationship between the United States and El Salvador in the 1960s as that of a philanthropist and grantee.
- **Love (Amour, 1968)** by Marie Vieux-Chauvet stages a violent revolt in rural Haiti as a liberatory response to philanthropic gestures made by plantation overseers.
- **In the Time of the Butterflies (1994)** by Julia Alvarez uses the philanthropic appeal to affirm the United States’ policies of humanitarian interventionism.



Reimagining and Redefining Philanthropy



Taken together, this alternative archive critiques philanthropy as a ruse of U.S. racial capitalism by insisting on representing the **“taking”** throughout the hemisphere that makes **“giving”** possible. In these texts, philanthropy emerges as a market intervention that exposes the myth of the supposedly **free market as a source of unfreedom**.

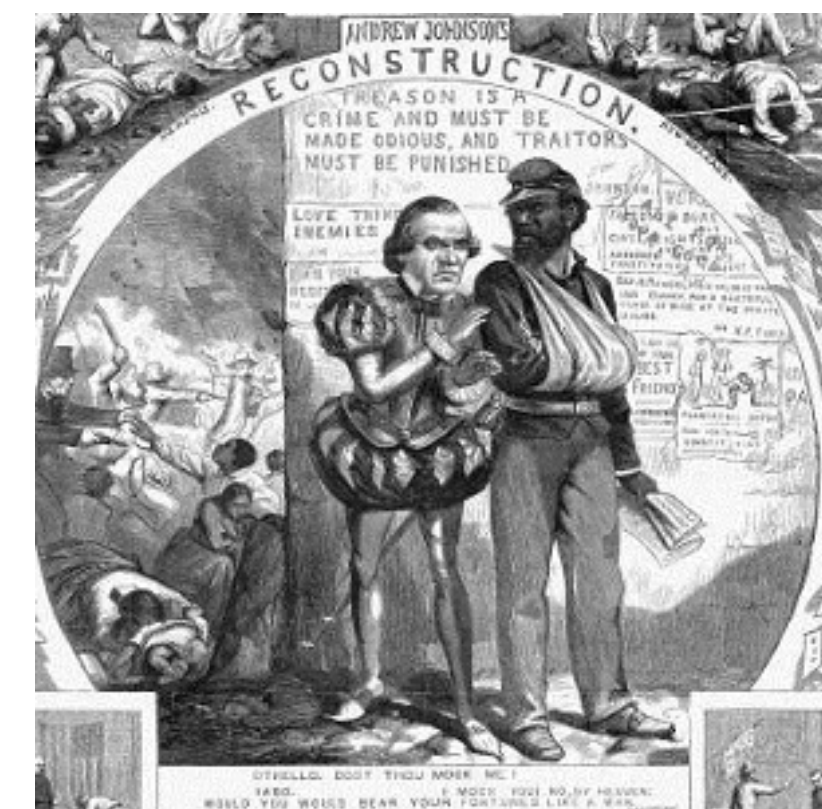
Fiction offers alternative conceptions of philanthropy as a secret weapon for both oppression and liberation. Plotting the redistribution of wealth and power, these counternarratives consider what it might mean to think of philanthropy as funding a revolution against an oppressive state or spending down wealth to fight racial and gender discrimination in the courts. Philanthropy in these stories means risking poverty or a loss of power in order to dismantle oppressive systems. This philanthropy is not tax deductible. It represents a “love of mankind” (*OED*) that comes from below and is rooted in acts of solidarity across race, gender, and class aimed at **collective freedom**.

A Brief History of American Philanthropy

This project argues that the culture of American philanthropy has been too narrowly defined by Gilded Age philanthropy of the United States and its reformist aims. It examines the culture of philanthropy in the Americas as produced and contested in literary texts set in three critical moments of global economic crisis centered in the United States that have defined philanthropy in the hemisphere.

Abandonment of Radical Reconstruction in 1877

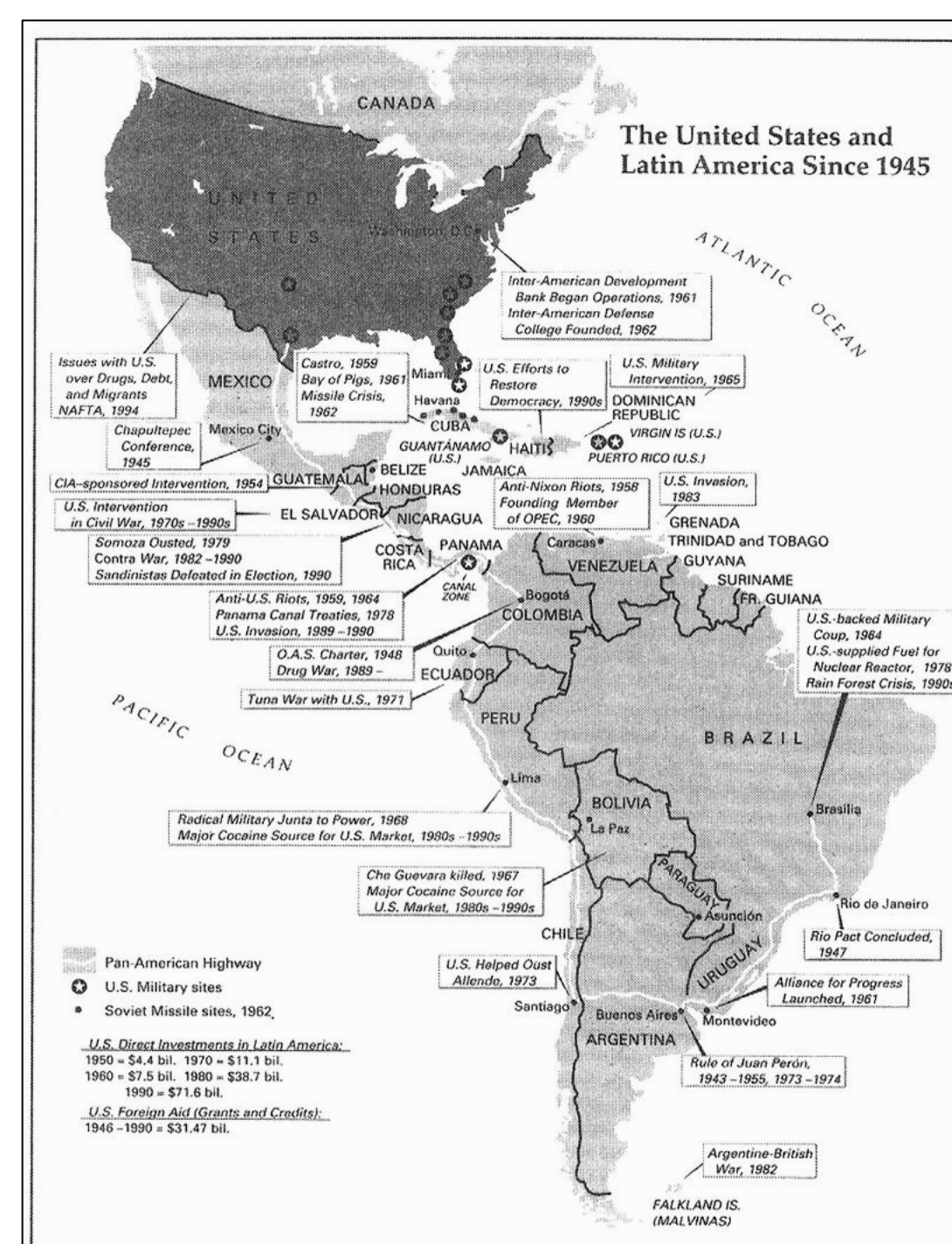
The rollback of comprehensive political and economic redistribution policies during the Reconstruction Era is an important context for understanding the uneven development of The Gilded Age. A **“system of white patronage,”** as W.E.B. Du Bois called it, arose in the place of legal redress for slavery.



Harper's Weekly, September 1866

Great Depression: A Global Phenomenon (1929-1939)

American philanthropy matured into a national ethic during the Depression Era. By 1940, many were calling philanthropy “a vital expression of the democratic way of life” (*The New York Times*). Describing its policies as that of a **“Good Neighbor”** in the hemisphere, the United States began to fashion the nation itself as a philanthropist, a **benevolent protector of the hemisphere**.

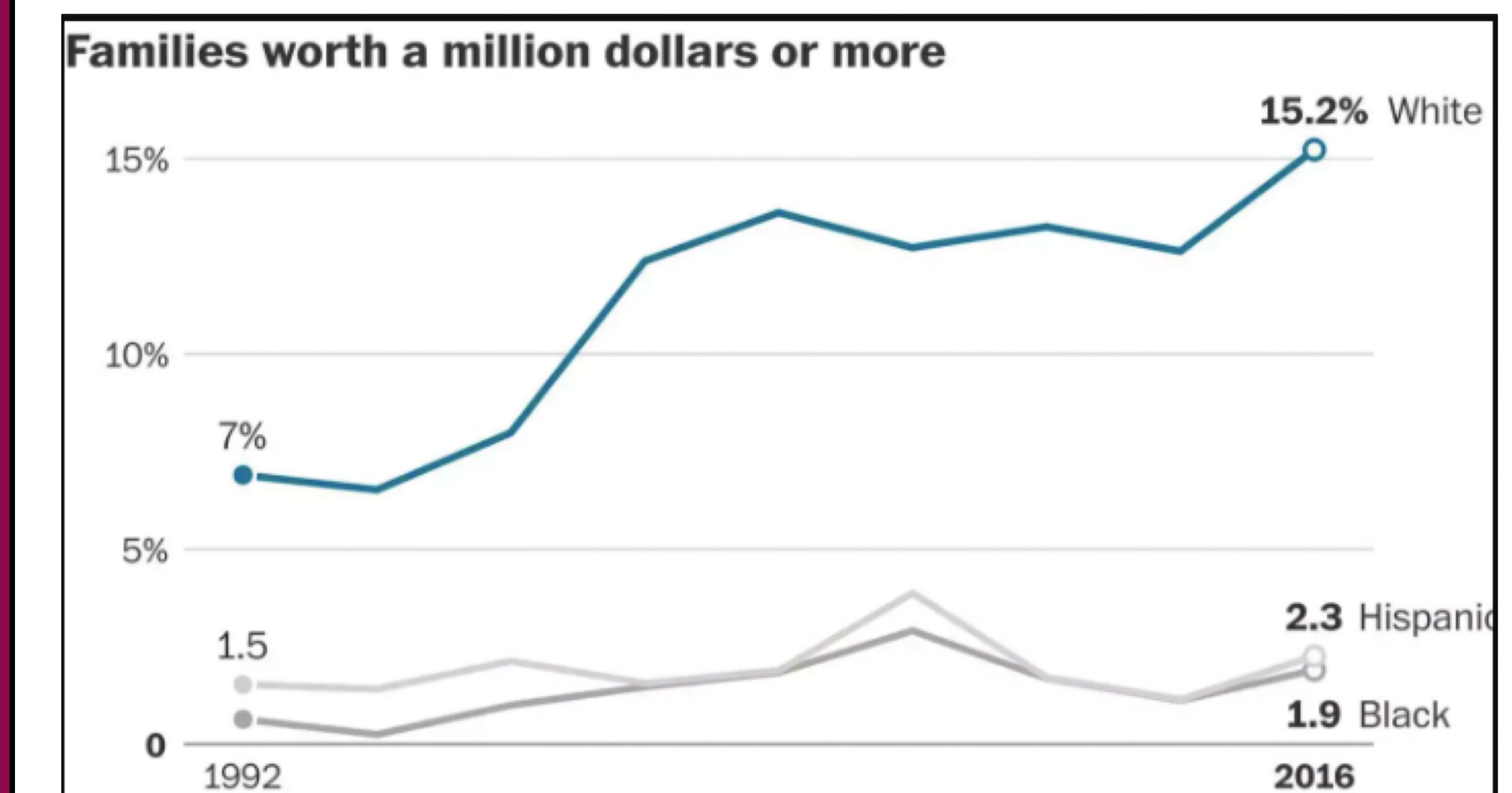


Cold War in the Americas 1947-1991

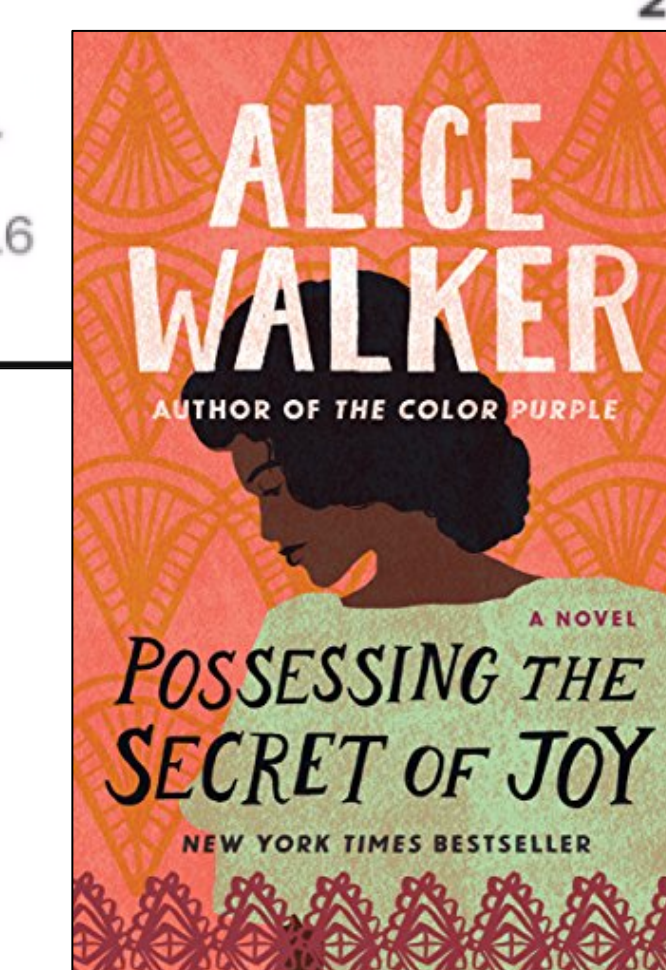
U.S. philanthropic foundations tripled their wealth during the most intensive periods of the Cold War, between the 1950s and the early 1970s. By the 1980s, philanthropic foundations emerged as one of the most influential **purveyors of soft power** throughout the Caribbean and Latin America.

Left: Map of U.S. interventions in Latin America since 1945 created in 2013 by Kryz Méndez Ramírez, PhD Candidate, UC San Diego.

Contemporary Fiction and Philanthrocapitalism



Percentages are based on inflation-adjusted figures.
Source: Triennial Survey of Consumer Finances, 2016
WASHINGTON POST



POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY
African language I used to know, now tossed up by my unconscious. I do not know from what part of Africa my African ancestors came, and so I claim the continent. I suppose I have created Olinka as my village and the Olinkans as one of my ancient, ancestral tribal peoples. Certainly I recognize Tashi as my sister.
A portion of the royalties from this book will be used to educate women and girls, men and boys, about the hazardous effects of genital mutilation, not simply on the health and happiness of individuals, but on the whole society in which it is practiced, and the world.
Mbele Aché.

Alice Walker
Costa Careyes, Mexico

- Our current moment has been called a New Gilded Age. It has given birth to **philanthrocapitalism**, defined as a movement in which “wealth creators apply business techniques & ways of thinking to their philanthropy” (Bishop & Green).
- Philanthropy is increasingly powerful and understood to bridge the gap between local need and domestic government services, global poverty and U.S. foreign aid.
- Part of the exponential growth of philanthropy since the 1980s includes **literature itself becoming philanthropic**.
- A feature of women’s culture, in particular, authors such as Alice Walker and Sandra Benitez are **donating royalties** from their books to fund nonprofit organizations whose missions align with the content of their novels.