Inheriting

George Paul Meiu

> We are bound to numerous ancestors about which we know nothing, through a loyalty whose force we can only imagine. We have in ourselves the memory of deeds that we do not know, but which we have embodied and integrated...
>
> Barbara Couvert

It all started with a story and a hand-scribbled inscription I spotted in the attic of my childhood home in the village of Vlădeni, Brașov county, Romania. To start with: the story. In 2013, I asked Uncle, my grandfather's elder brother, if he still remembered his paternal grandmother (my second great-grandmother), Susana Meiu. As I write, her portrait, the only image I have of her, hangs in front of me: bright eyes, an upright posture, a stern demeanor (Fig. 1). She must have been in her late teens when this portrait was made; the style of her hairdo and dress (including the beads) suggesting she was yet unmarried. Drawn in charcoal, the portrait must be from the early 1890s. I found it in the attic of our house nearly a century later, in 1995. My own grandma did not know who the woman in the portrait was. Grandma had married into this household in 1954 and did not care much about learning who my grandfather's ancestors had been. But Uncle, who himself had grown up in this household (before he married out), remembered her, if only vaguely. He was four years old, when Susana, his grandmother, died. But, throughout his childhood, her portrait continued to hang in the room facing the street – the house's 'good room', as it were.

'She was a kind woman', Uncle recalled. 'As children, we'd run away and do silly things. But she would never punish us or pull our ears.' Uncle paused to think. There did not seem

Figure 1: Susana Meiu (1875 - 1936).

to be much else to remember. Suddenly, like in a flash, he recalled that, after Susana's first husband (his grandfather) had died, she had remarried. She then brought her new husband into her late husband's household, where she had been living with her two teenage sons. Sometimes in the late 1920s, Uncle said, Susana's second husband hung himself. His suicide had been a family secret. Uncle found out about it by accident. One day, while Uncle was still a child, his father (my great grandfather) fought a man in the village pub

after he had unabashedly insulted him with a set of rather mysterious words: 'Gheorghe', the man said, 'your oxen got fat from the hanged man's twine.' (Romanian [henceforth, R.]: *Bă Gheorghe, ți s-au îngrășat boii din ața spânzuratului*.)

I had neither heard this phrase before nor fully understood why it had been insulting. I asked Uncle to explain. Tanti Reveca, Uncle's witty wife, who was listening in on our conversation jumped in to explain it herself: 'It's like saying that you got rich off the hanged man, that you profited from him. It's as if the hanged man continues to water your oxen.' There appear to be at least two layers of meaning to this phrase. First, a metaphysical one: the phrase posits the hanged man as continuing somehow to toil for the living. This echoes the Greek Orthodox belief that people who commit suicide do not pass easily into the other world, being left to roam in the *in-between*. Hence, the bodies of those who commit suicide are often not received in the church and are not buried in the cemetery, but on its edges or even outside it. Second, there is a more literal connotation to this phrase: 'to have one's oxen get fat through the hanged man's twine' can also mean 'to become rich by profiting from the deceased'; that is, by appropriating his wealth in a rather illegitimate way. Legitimate inheritance was not profiteering. So, in this instance, it might have been the particular kinship relationship *step*father–*step*son that the expression highlighted as problematic.

But what about the twine (R: *ață*)? Why not the hangman's rope or noose (R: *frânghie*; *sfoară*)? In Romanian, thread or twine can be used metaphorically to suggest the idea of 'course', 'flow' and 'continuity'. Grandma, for example, used to say that 'life is like a ball of twine, when the twine runs out, life ends, no matter where you are or what you do'. In the phrase 'to fatten one's oxen off someone's twine', the twine can then stand for two kinds of 'courses': first, the concrete vertical intergenerational kinship relationship

through which inheritance descends; a line of genealogical continuity. Second, it can also be an indirect allusion to the 'course' (vertical fall) of the hanging rope as an instrument of suicide. Gheorghe's inheritance was thus morally suspicious because of the nature of his relation to his stepfather *and* the latter's problematic death.

Uncle did not know why this man hung himself; nor, for that matter, what his name had been. He heard there might have been fights between him and his wife. All he knew was that he had hung himself in the barn. My own grandma later recalled vaguely having heard *something* about *some* hanging, in hushed voices, from her in-laws. This had been a secret that had not been spoken about openly among them. But, while she did not know much about it, Grandma asserted rather categorically that the hanging had happened in an older barn, not in the one we currently had, which had been built in the old one's place. Was she thus trying to distance us from this event in the family's past? Was she seeking to rhetorically cleanse and rebuild – as with the proverbial barn – the legitimacy of our genealogy and inheritance?

Some background is necessary here. From the late nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth, in our village, several principles of kinship, gender and residence shaped how property was passed down across generations. First, if a family's land holdings constituted what anthropologists call 'partible inheritance' (inheritance that can be divided amongst the family's offspring), the homestead (including the house) represented 'impartible inheritance': only one offspring could inherit it, along with the duty to care for the parents in their old age. For example, my grandfather inherited the house, while Uncle, his brother, married out, and Grandma married in. Similarly, two generations prior, my second great grandfather inherited the same household from his father, while his sister married out, and Susana, the woman in

Figure 2: A name and a year scribled in the plaster of an attic wall.

the portrait, married in. Things become more complex, as we shall see, when Susan marries her second husband who moves into her first husband's household.

Second, while last names were passed down patrilineally (through fathers), so-called 'homestead names' (R: *poreclă pe curte*) were passed down through either men or women, depending on who continued to live in the parental home. Hence, houses constituted a competing and complementary line of kinship and descent, being often even more important to social reproduction than patrilineal descent through last names (Because the village was endogamous – people married within it – last names repeated themselves often, while household names were unique, hence they were the ultimate social identifiers.)

Third, women played a central role in the reproduction and transmission of homestead wealth. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, in Vlădeni, women often far outlived men. As widows and mothers, they played a very important role in keeping together and augmenting

household wealth, as a way to solidify relationships with and between their offspring. Such reproductive work also entailed, at times, taking on second husbands or carrying for elderly, childless relatives to then transfer their wealth (upon their death) to that of their own homesteads. Something similar happened with Susana and her second husband.

In summer 2013, rearranging things in the attic, I discovered a name and a year inscribed on the wall separating the roofs of the older and the newer house buildings (Fig. 2). Before my grandparents had built the extension in the 1960s, that wall had faced outside, towards the courtyard. On it, was the inscription *Neculaiu Stăniloe 1925* written in an elongated script that resembled the handwriting of a primary school pupil or of someone without much school education. At first, I did not recognize the name. I knew that, at least since 1820, this household had been in the Meiu family. It was also unlikely that construction workers would sign their names in the plaster of a house they helped build. Typically, it was the name of the person with whose money the house had been built that appeared scribbled on its façade. A few years later, while doing research at the State Archives in Brașov, I found this Neculaiu Stăniloae had been indeed the man to whom my second great-grandmother Susana had remarried (on January 29th, 1912), a year and a half after her first husband's death (Fig. 3).

The year the house was completed – the year next to Neculaiu's name – is also relevant here. In 1925, my great-grandfather, Gheorghe Meiu, was twenty-five years old and was probably getting ready to marry. At that time, Susana, Gheorghe's mother, had already been married for thirteen years to Neculaiu, Gheorghe's stepfather. Because Neculaiu married in the household that Susana and her sons had inherited from Susana's first husband, it is very likely that Neculaiu (who appears to have not been previously married) sold his own house,

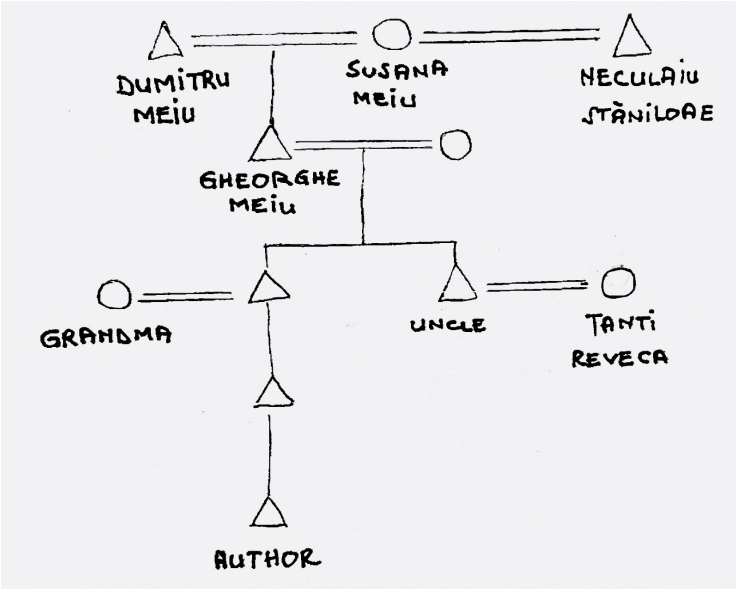

Figure 3: Kinship chart of people mentioned in the text.

elsewhere in the village. He must then have invested this money to build Susana and her sons a stone house. In the 1920s, most villagers had already switched from wooden houses to stone houses, now considering the wooden ones a sign of poverty and backwardness. For many, switching from a house of wood to one of stone was possible only after years of migrating as blue-color labor to the United States, Argentina or Brazil. But Susana's first husband had been too old – twenty-two years her senior – and ill to travel. When he died in 1910, it seems, he left her a poor widow. As widows often remarried to consolidate their offspring's wealth, might Susana have used the approaching marriage of her youngest son (who was to remain in the homestead) to persuade Neculaiu to sell his fortune and build them the new house? Could the quarrels between them have arisen precisely over property?

What preoccupied me more was yet another question: Could Neculaiu have put his name on the wall in a (desperate)

gesture intended to inscribe him in a line of descent (the household inheritance) that, as he might have correctly anticipated, would absorb his fortune but erase his existence, rendering him forgotten? After all, neither his wife nor his stepsons took his name. What is more, a few years after his death, Susana died and was buried next to Dumitru Meiu, the father of her children, thus excluding Neculaiu from any form of genealogical commemoration. Buried in an unmarked grave, by the edge of the cemetery, as people who committed suicide usually were, he was to be forgotten. He remained a passing story, a story that became taboo in part because of its tragic ending. Certainly, the offense brought to Gheorghe, Susana's son, by the man in the pub was also the transgression of this familial taboo. It is then precisely through the enforcement of secrecy that the *rope* itself becomes then a *twine*: a less visible line, a line of continuity disavowed from genealogical remembering and repressed into seeming collective oblivion, but a line on which a fortune had nevertheless descended; a line not quite invisible, an incomplete eclipse.

Neculaiu might have signed his name precisely in a desperate effort to survive in the face of a line that seemed to swallow him up. Regardless of his intent, however, his name written thinly, like a twine, in the mortar of the house becomes the echo of a *collective genealogical unconscious*: a sign left in the attic, an enigma, a symptom, whose threads can only difficultly be unraveled today, but which nevertheless resist immediate and complete forgetting – for a while, at least.

Sara Ahmed (2000) argues that genealogy is never self-evident: it is rather the product of a hard, ongoing social work of *alignment*: a continuous active (re)orienting of bodies towards particular pasts and futures, often via material objects. 'Rather than presuming that the vertical line [of genealogy] is simply given', Ahmed writes, 'we would see the vertical line

as an effect of this process of alignment' (71). Family portraits hanging on our walls are media of such alignment. They set us *in line with* a normative genealogy that orients our bodies in time and space. Importantly, such objects also 'orient us toward the future: it is where the child is asked to direct its desire by accepting the family line as its own inheritance' (90). Objects of alignment, Ahmed says, are often in the background of our everyday activities: in mundane life, we pass by portraits hanging on our walls without giving them much importance. It is interesting to return here then also to the relationship between Susana's portrait and Neculaiu's scribble. For a long time, one had hung in the house, the other stayed hidden in the attic. The portrait constituted a visible background to everyday activities, while the hidden scribble on the attic's wall had been something of *a background to the background* – an element of what I call the *unconscious of inheritance*: something thinner, less visible or accessible, something that – like the twine of the hanged – is disavowed, veiled in secrecy, an unknown known.

But genealogical alignment also requires forgetting as a necessary mechanism of its reproduction: soon, Susana's portrait also ended up buried deeply in the attic, where I found it later, and those of us living in the house did not know it existed or, after I found it, who she was. Hence, with time, objects of genealogical alignment can become objects of the unconscious of inheritance – things we don't know we know, things we live with without knowing we had inherited them in the first place.

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Inheritance, Siobhan Magee (2018: 1) argues, refers to the 'transferal of property from its owner to one or more heirs, usually related persons of subsequent generations'. It may include

> homes, land, livestock, ritual knowledge, titles, money,-genes, or intellectual property ... [and] ... may be framed primarily as a matter of kinship, a mourning practice, a process codified by a legal system, a facet of economic life, a political issue that brings social reproduction and inequality to the fore, or a combination of several of these frameworks.

For a long time, anthropologists have argued that to understand what kinds of society any one group of people seek to (re)produce, one needs to look at their inheritance practices. How and what is inherited and by whom reveal, in turn, what relations of kinship, descent, gender and generation people value or devalue; what institutions and ideologies dominate; how particular forms of memory (cultural arrangements of remembering and forgetting) work to foreground some relations and background others; and what kinds of material objects are necessary for a collective future to become imaginable.

Inheriting, as anthropologist Jack Goody (1983) famously shows, is a deeply ideological process: the customary regulation of wealth transmission has long been regulated through customary, legal, religious, and other forms of knowledge by way of consolidating wealth and power for various social categories based on gender, generation, class, race and more. Even so, inheriting has hardly ever been a straight-forward process. Indeed, more often than not, it is not only a source of continuity, but also of conflict. Conflicts over property may produce new lines of social divergence and difference. A closer look at inheriting practices anywhere shall reveal the kinds of struggles and contestations involved in social reproduction – that is, in the concrete efforts to craft a tomorrow through the cultural and material means available in the present. Struggles over inheritance are always also intimate struggles. Hence, to consider the implication

of inheriting practices, I suggest, one must also turn to the related concept of *intimacy*.

Intimacy refers broadly to a set of intersubjective processes that posit – and create the effect of –various kinds of proximities and attachments between different bodies or persons. In other words, intimacy refers both to the actual forms of closeness and mutuality that people create *and* to the discursive modes through which we describe and think of those relations as 'intimate' (hence, it is always also an object of ideology). Whether momentary or lasting, immediately corporeal or technologically mediated across distance, intimacies carry the possibility of both affection *and* aggression, the capacity to both bound *and* burden.

I propose we see inheritance and intimacy not only as strongly interlinked, but also as inherently polyvalent. First, if anthropologists have used inheritance to refer to the transmission of property across generations (vertical temporal line), they have also used it to speak of *cultural* transmission, more generally. Pierre Bourdieu (1972), for example, shows how the transmission of property entails also the passing down and transformation of subjective bodily orientations, a set of schemes of perception and thought that are inherent in action – what he calls the *habitus*. According to Bourdieu, 'the "book" from which the children learn their vision of the world is read with the body, in and through the movements and displacements which make the space within which they are enacted as much as they are made by it' (90). To recall the portrait or the scribble from the above example, we must then remember that the passing down of objects also entails bodily orientations that are cultural and historical.

Second, the intimacy involved in these encounters is also polyvalent. On the one hand, it can refer to the private attachments of a seemingly restrictive space of family, kinship, or – to recall the example above – the house and household.

On the other hand, anthropologists also speak of *cultural intimacy* (Herzfeld 1997) to refer to attachments, affects and knowledge shared across wider social spaces – from the face-to-face sociality of a village to the stranger sociality of a nation. Here, wider cultural understandings of what is inheritance, genealogy and legitimate social reproduction centrally inform more proximate relations. And the other way around: the subject's intimate space may shape cultural intimacies associated with inherited things.

In Figure 4, I add to the intersection of inheritance (vertical temporal line) and intimacy (horizontal spatial line) a third variable: the virtual, the unconscious of inheritance, that is, the totality of things *we do not know we know* that we nevertheless inherit and that shape our intimacies, even if from the background of the background, from behind the visible, the literal, the fully knowable. Although Grandma, for example, did not know who the hanged man had been or what his name was, she (and through her, my father and his brother) always felt the need to legitimize our family's inheritance as one derived from our genealogical line and based on that line's hard work. French psychogenealogy speaks of such phenomena as belonging to an 'intergenerational unconscious': an unconscious different from the individual one and through which our ancestors' sufferings, anxieties and aspirations continue to live through us, in our familial habitus. Indigenous ontologies also often reference the ways in which people's actions may have consequences for many generations of their descendants (consider, for example, the Samburu concept of *njoki*, according to which the transgressions, ritual omissions and other wrongdoings of long-dead ancestors can affect their unsuspecting living descendants with various physical and mental afflictions; Straight 2007: 96). Contrary to notions of autonomous personhood associated with liberal modernity, anthropology, like psychoanalysis

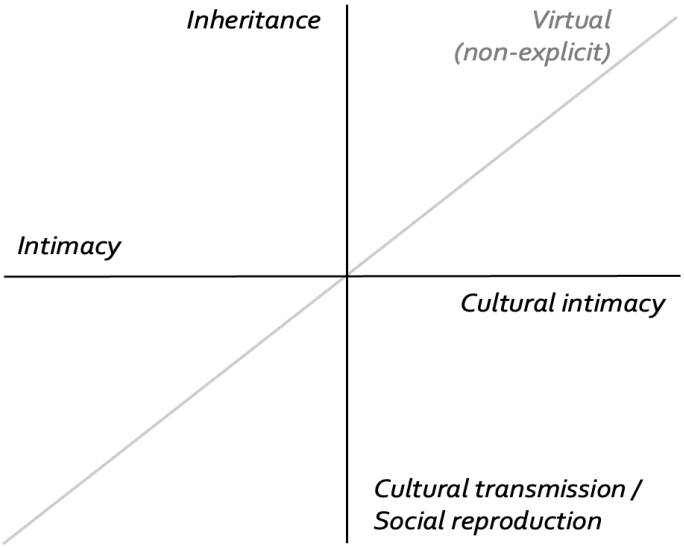

Figure 4: The 'unconscious of inheritance' emerges as a virtual third axis between inheritance and intimacy.

(and psychogenealogy) have emphasized the importance of deconstructing the individual, while attending to its complex interconnections with both its contemporaries and its ancestors. It is important then not only to attend to the literal, visible or known forms of inheritance but also to all that we don't know we know has been passed down to us and that continues to shape who we are and what we can become.

To interrogate what counts as inheritance, how extant intimacies are geared towards producing particular lines of legitimacy and genealogy, and what the intersection of inheritance and intimacy might hide, we can then start elsewhere. We can begin with the discarded materials of inheritance – a thrown-away portrait and a barely noticeable scribble on a wall. Elizabeth Povinelli (2002: 218) offers the term 'genealogical grid' to refer to the ideological mechanisms that deploy lines of descent to organize state dispensations like inheritance, marriage and welfare. This has meant that, at various times, non-

reproductive people, people engaged in non-normative forms of kinship and others often fell off the grid of genealogy. So too with Neculaiu: probably without children of his own, his wealth absorbed into Susana's household and line of descent, Neculaiu remained but a name scribbled on a wall. And it is precisely from such seemingly trivial signs and symptoms that our ethnographic imagination must proceed. For, what is inherited is not only the things we know and in relation to which we consciously position ourselves but also the effects of erasures, long-disavowed secrets, the numerous twines of competing, sometimes less legitimate, lines and attachments.

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