

Symposium: How Can a Philosophy of Inheritance be Framed Adequately?

In the lead essay 'What Would a Philosophy of Inheritance Look Like?', J. Reid Miller proposes a broader, interdisciplinary lens to adequately comprehend how material and non-material attributes are transferred through inter-generational processes. His co-symposiasts Claire Katz, Fernando Zapata, and Didier Zúñiga agree that current frames of analyses that narrow inheritance either to biological, economic, or cultural transfer be broadened. Building upon Reid Miller's proposal, Katz urges that wounds of national traumas be addressed, should the wounds not be transferred to the next generation; Zapata follows Reid Miller in understanding inheritance through processes in which belongingness is bestowed, while Zúñiga underscores that histories of domination and oppression be studied to comprehend how injustices and inequalities continue to be reproduced. In his reply, Reid Miller reiterates that multiple ways of belonging be envisioned and implemented that are able to narrate inheritances from different perspectives.

Key words: inheritance studies; Indigenous revitalization and resurgence; inheriting wounds of justice; *inter vivos* exchanges; heritage of knowledge formations; trauma; processes of transitivity

What Would a Philosophy of Inheritance Look Like?

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1 Why Inheritance Studies?

Anxieties about inheritance—its operation, meaning, and legitimacy—have come into the foreground as research into patterns of value, material identity, knowledge, and status emphasize comparative and longitudinal continuities. Recent discussions on the role of genealogical linguistic and communal transfers in aesthetic sentiment, ancestral selfhood, and learning outcomes, to name only a few, highlight the breadth of inheritance beyond rote transfers of biological, economic, and political capacities.¹ Such interventions that expand analysis from the event of the transfer itself to the language of succession raise questions as to whether inheritance can be sufficiently comprehended by current methodologies of exchange and iteration. What does it mean to accord trauma the ability to pass down through tribes, races, and families when its psychoanalytic theorization presumes an original point of rupture actuated as a radically personal experience? How do we square the enjoinder to celebrate racial and ethnic heritage as expressing pride in shared communal qualities with the belief in such categories as illusory and distortive lineages from which the individual must be credited the power to disaffiliate for the sake of its freedom? How might we grasp the rise of environmental studies not as the mere expansion of a scientific endeavor but also as an ethical commitment to immortality cast as a promise to future unknown descendants?

The reasons for studying inheritance as a collective set of questions reflects these growing convolutions of inquiry that cross multiple sites of disciplinary inquiry while wrestling longitudinally with the movement of affiliative institutional and individual features like entitlements, dispositions, standards, and traits. At stake in these contestations is not just the transfer of resources taken as material “belongings” but the means by which subjects come to inhabit through inheritance their communal endowments as demonstrations of belongingness. As a prosaic example, consider this recent justification from an artist on the need for diversification of U.S. regional theater:

If someone were to ask me what makes me Black [...] I would say that art and culture are inherent in who I am. It’s the music, it’s the food, it’s the dance, it’s the words. So there’s a group of people out there that a lot of organizations don’t market to, or program for [...] And they’re missing out on all those people who would probably come and engage with them (Mondello 2022).

Little in this statement draws attention to itself, and indeed, within the longer news article in which it appears, readers may gloss it as a clichéd articulation of racial identity. Yet this admitted cliché of inheritance grounds not only the artist’s (and the article’s) argument for arts diversification but also a panoply of related goods aside from the speaker’s own self-determining dispositions and desires: the fostering of commerce, the enabling of linguistic communication, and the facilitation of intercultural exchange. Moreover, the assertion proposes this relation of self and inheritance without seeming to raise the specter of determinism; the appeal does not, I suspect, instigate an immediate worry that the artist is promulgating racial stereotypes, as those same assertions would in being articulated *as* racial inheritances, i.e., “Music and dance are inherent to Black people.” And yet, is it not the continued citation of these affiliative racial traits by subjects and media—the *cliché* of it all—that warrants the disproportionate coverage of black musicians and entertainers as fulfilling the media’s own commitment to both “arts diversification” and “racial diversity”? Is this what it means to preserve, honor, and perpetuate a legacy?

The dilemma this illustration provokes for a philosophy of inheritance is not whether certain features are what really “make someone Black” but of how such attributions of inheritance sustain, interpret, and authorize the kinds of beings we take ourselves and others to be—not as already self-defined individuals or groups but as subjects of belonging whose singularity surfaces at the intersection of legacies we come into. This opening onto a philosophy of inheritance, or a broader “Inheritance Studies,” signals an interest less on the sociopolitical analyses of tangible and intangible distributions across generations—often driven by egalitarian and redistributive goals—and more on theorizing inheritance as a commonly invoked explanation for how things, ideas, and beings come into material and non-material attributes through transferable belongingness. In this short piece, presented as an invitational overture rather than a detailed composition, I offer some initial reasons for thinking that inheritance poses distinctive questions meriting innovative theoretical approaches, as well as propose some defining features of inheritance to show how those questions cut across multiple disciplines to encompass an expansive area of inquiry worthy of designation and collaborative investigation.

2 The Object of Inheritance Studies

In asking, “What would a philosophy of inheritance look like?” I am not suggesting a new object of study but instead proposing coordinated analyses of long-standing humanistic and worldly concerns—from souls to systems—in light of their reliance on processes of inheritable passage. By restoring our puzzlement and fascination in the pervasive role of such explanations, inheritance studies would enact a shifting of sightlines that reveals the multitude of connected expressions of inheritance that suffuse our reasonings, even as we overtly valorize explanations about the natural world and ourselves that reduce inheritance to a simple, untextured causeway.

Part of the reason for this problem is that inheritance tends not to constitute a sufficiently substantial and cross-disciplinary quandary for the domains with which it is prominently associated. Three invocations of generational transfer appear to foreground ongoing conceptions of inheritance: the transfer of money and property (economic/legal); the transfer of genetic information (biological); and the transfer of shared ritualistic practices and beliefs (cultural), each more or less consigned to its own research domain, producing the appearance of linguistically and conceptually heterogenous discourses. Hence, the attempt to unlock DNA sequencing does not perceive its success to depend upon the ability of economics to map the long-term effects on low-wage workers of reducing capital gains below income tax, which is not a forecast perceived as informed by efforts to instill in youth the values of global democracy. Though primary for each domain, inheritable transfer seems not to figure outside of its role particular to each unique inquiry. This implies, within each of these domains, inheritance as a mode of transfer fully subordinate to what it transfers, a process so thin and insubstantial that its instances bear no relation to each other; hence the processes of biological inheritance, economic inheritance, and cultural inheritance seem to intersect at an empty metaphor, one that unfolds onto no shared epistemology or methodology.

The explicitness of a theory of inheritance would allow us to note how these atomistic lexicons can and do serve as kindred analogues across multiple fields. In addition, it would link conversations in other disciplines that do not discuss inheritance by name yet implicitly share a theory of inheritance as a focal point of analysis, reflected through expressions that euphemize the process of inheritance: cycles of poverty, abuse, and addiction; paradigms and models in industry and science; institutional memory; criminal tendencies; symbolic archetypes; kinship networks; structural injustice; etc.

These expressions are themselves sites of inheritable analysis but also attune us to other topics similarly reliant on conceptions of descent: debates on the removal of public monuments and renaming of totemic markers as a realignment of inheritable lines of belongingness; contestations around the authorization of Native and indigenous, national, ethnic, and racial memberships; hypotheses on how “non-reproductive” sexual orientation and identity reproduces itself as alternatively biologically given and as self-fashioned cultural performance; processes of appropriation and dissemination of artistic and cultural practices as subject to and determinant of ancestral endowments; “endemic” histories of sexual harassment and patriarchal masculinity as alternately natural and pathological. This list, of course, does not begin to cover the relevant expansiveness of topics in which inheritance plays a principal role, but offers a handful of contemporary phenomena recharting its parameters.

A philosophy of inheritance, then, would investigate the means by which we attempt to reason through, explicate, and accord responsibility for these channels of bequeathal, formal and informal. When we situate a quality through inheritance by stating, for example, that it “runs in the family,”

what function or form of explanation does this provide? What do we imagine we are making sense of through this expression? It is sometimes deployed in an institutionally authorized and empirical manner, as when a health professional assesses an individual's disposition to a tendency: "Does heart disease or obesity run in your family?" Yet the same ritual is performed colloquially when traits, skills, or moral perspectives are located within a framework of provenance—as when we attribute being "introverted," "having a knack for working with our hands," or "being invested in our neighborhood" as qualities derived from an ancestor, socio-economic group, or even species. The encouragement here is to see all these ways of speaking in their various illocutionary contexts as "running in the same family." That is, we should hear such expressions not as an imprecise vernacular of causality but as a conceptually different account of how belonging and belongingness happens and, correlatively, of how our current conditions of related and disparate endowments came to be.

3 Inheritance and Ownership

There may not seem anything mysterious about how my giving you a watch in person can make that watch yours.² But it is less obvious how that same watch, sitting on my bedroom dresser, can become yours because I expire during the night. Even if I have written on a piece of paper that the watch is to become yours upon my death—when would we say that I have given it to you? At the time the words are written? Signed and notarized? (But I possess it still.) If you inherit the watch at the instant of my death (another implausible time stamp), I have not so much given it to you as that the watch has become yours. We might then propose that the testator's written "Will" as a promissory document aims to extend the intention of the self beyond the demise of its being so that the embodied subject might persist across death as a presence that hands over its bequeathal in person, making inheritance no different from any "living" transfer between two presences.

But this effort to literalize inheritable transfer obscures how inheritance contravenes frameworks of exchange, such as the contract, conditional on two or more consenting wills. For one, you might well inherit the watch independently of whether I write, sign, or "will" anything, merely on the basis of provisions and norms (like primogeniture or entailment) that govern the social movement of objects via death. Such movement does not require my dictation: the transfer obtains whether I have intended it or not. Even if willed when I was alive, that willing is insufficient to make it yours. This is, in part, because there is no longer an "I" available to participate in and complete the circuit of giver and receiver. Instead of a "giver" in this relay, there is instead an ancestor, predecessor, or progenitor: a disembodied, atemporal (non)being that cannot properly "will" or give consent. By the same token, the recipient cannot then function as a "receiver" but must instead become one who equally partakes of non-being for the sake of that transfer, i.e., as heir, trustee, or successor, insofar as their inexorable mortality is what assures the continuance of the legacy. The heir-apparent is simultaneously an ancestor-apparent, their death foretold as a condition for becoming a point of transit within an extended lineage. Moreover, we might suggest that there is no ancestry without an inheritance, no lineage without a legacy—in short, there is no meaningless descent.

To expand on the proposition of our earlier artist, then, it would not be individuals who engineer legacies; rather, inheritance would establish and uphold the relational self and community within transferable belongingness. A family, cultural, or institutional heirloom becomes "yours" only in

escaping your full proprietary ownership of it (linguistically marked, for instance, by remaining your “grandmother’s ring” or a “team uniform” even when in your sole physical possession).³ Rather than denoting the proprietary belonging of the individual or joint ownership of several persons, inheritance instead confers belongingness, a relationality conditioned on the promissory non-being of its testators and successors. It is certainly the case that one does not come into inheritance only or primarily as the consequence of an actual death—what one might want to view as the *primal scene* of inheritance. But it does not follow that intergenerational transfers (of money, opportunities, habits, etc.) that occur while both legator and legatee are alive therefore escape the feature of non-being in inheritance or can adequately be spoken of as an isolated, single conveyance from you to me. Even opening this chain to two or three generations (from you to me and then from me to them) excerpts an origin point of an initial, generative will and object as the primary elements of inheritance that thereby eclipse the historical and multiple legacies by which inheritance qualifies the terms of such transfer (e.g., what kinds of figures can show up as legators/legatees in these lineages and what kinds of properties are transferrable as legacies).⁴ Doing so mistakes inheritance as a series of willed bequeathals that one could decide to perform or not. Such interpretations place inheritance within the bounds of the individually and institutionally regulable, that is, within an arbitrational context of negotiation, consent, agreement, and refusal.

4 The Economy of Inheritance

Inheritance, as what does not depend upon or presume intentional giving or receiving, sustains but is not beholden to economies of exchange like exogamy, markets, pedagogy, etc. The “will”—manifested as intention or last testament, whether of an individual, collective, or universal—is ultimately inessential to inheritable transfer; inheritance persists independent of our wish for it to do so and in ways beyond our ability to administer it. Inheritance is not a special instance of exchange but what dissipates the ideal of exchange as a regulable cycle by foreclosing the ability of the law, biology, or politics to definitively determine the ancestor/successor in the same way it does the giver/receiver. For example, it is true—according to the codes of the giver/receiver in relations of pedagogy—that as a professor, “I teach students,” a relation administered through multiple types of exchange: tuition, exams, salary, tenure, degrees, et al. (different exchanges would obtain in alternative forms of instruction). But within the frame of inheritance, it also seems clear that knowledge is not what I pass to the student as the fulfillment of a contract through the delivery of a resource or good or as what is owed to the student as a right; rather, knowledge (however such content is signified: information, ideology, reason, skills, value, power, etc.) passes through and actuates me as a professor within a flow that lies beyond the capacity of institutions, myself, or students to fully regulate. What I teach is both mine and not mine, as I recognize knowledge as situated at and the consequence of multiple ancestries of global thought, and because knowledge can pass through me only insofar as it remains beyond me, I cannot dictate its reception or its effect on that line of knowledge itself. It is, rather, through the non-propriety of “my” knowledge that it can then belong (and not belong) to students as well. This feature of non-propriety would not then be an oddity of inheritable transfer but one of its primary conditions, one foreclosed in contractual relations of exchange and property.

Inheritable ways of being source individuality by substantiating it in mortal relations that, while providing purpose and meaning for the individual, comprise much wider circulating streams of

language, value, and practice that precede and extend beyond any particular subject formation. Unlike the western envisioning of the subject who exceeds, ruptures, resists, and transgresses formative genealogies—where true, authentic individuality surfaces only in those moments of separation and transcendence (a theorization meant perhaps as an objection to coarse, modernist theories of racial and ethnic determinism), the subject of inheritance is, rather, exceeded by its multiple endowments, and thus endures its legacies as a surfeit rather than a suffocation, providing conceptual support for theories that attempt to grasp the individual within this abundance, such as intersectionality. Propelling rather than presuming individuality, inheritance provides purpose and meaning for beings and institutions not derived from biological instinct or political self-interest while remaining itself undetermined. Freud remarks on this dual configuration with respect to sexuality:

The individual himself regards sexuality as one of his own ends; whereas from another point of view he is an appendage [...] He is the mortal vehicle of a (possibly) immortal substance—like the inheritor of an entailed property, who is only the temporary holder of an estate which survives him (Freud 1914: 78).

Freud suggests that we experience our own sexuality as a personal objective while also participating as a nexus of continuation for the ongoing “substance” of sexuality. Although there is a temptation to interpret the “substance” the individual-as-vehicle conveys as the preservation of a species—and indeed, Freud may himself have had such an understanding—such a reproductive reading would interject a telos into these open-ended lines of inheritance. The more profound insight, as I take it, is that while the individual experiences sexuality as a goal-oriented drive with respect to, say, the sexual object and aim and can thus meaningfully speak of their “own” sexuality, sexuality as a feature or trait of beings—that which, like an “entailed property,” iterates beyond the death of any individual—has no intrinsic objective. There is nothing it is destined to do or preserve and is not invested even in its own continuance.

The lesson we might draw from this is that our legacies can generate meaning and reasons for us without those meanings and reasons having to anchor any inheritable way of being. The belongingness, that is, that we derive from inheritance, is possible because those features and traits do not themselves belong to inheritance as its end or purpose. Despite there being, as stated earlier, no lineage without a legacy, that legacy, object, quality, or substance as it manifests historically for us is not intrinsically or instrumentally coincident with the lineage through which it passes. Thus we can appeal to inheritances and elicit from them, like our theatrical artist, not only values, goals, and the felt conflicts among them pertaining to our sense of self but also our justifications and reasons for committing to projects and outlooks, making promises to future selves and others, and working to change conditions in the world in the name of those who carried these passions and doubts before us.

5 The Individual within Inheritance

In his 1797 *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant puzzles over inheritance as “the question [of] whether and how it is possible for belongings to pass from one to the other at the exact moment at which the subject ceases to exist” (Kant 1991: 110). Unlike “a transfer in the empirical sense” that

occurs in “real time”—a purchase, gift, or even theft—inheritance, he contends, takes place in the “moment” of death, an “ideal” cipher that escapes temporal cognizance: a symbolic rather than particular point in time. Because no identifiable “now” announces this transfer, the subject cannot recognize and confront its occurrence, whereby it might welcome or halt that enactment; the inheritable “change of belongings” occurs without the awareness or consent of the inheritor. And while one can sometimes sell, discard, or renounce inherited belongings, they cannot refuse the belongingness by which they come into those possessions.

Kant is troubled, however, by what this might mean for the modern western individual as bearing an inviolable right to self-determination. Despite his belief that inheritances bring mostly “good things,” Kant is keen to ensure that no individual is held liable for the debts and crimes of their ancestors, declaring that “subjection cannot be *inherited*” (Kant 1991: 171, 140). He thus theorizes a radical dissonance between inheritance and the objects and qualities inherited. While individuals cannot, he holds, disaffiliate from inheritable lines of belongingness (an “absolute impossibility”), they remain free to preserve or discharge by choice the belongings transferred through those lines: “I alone can accept [a legacy] or refuse it as I please” (Kant 1991: 171). What belongingness within an inheritance confers for him is merely a right to access the opportunities and benefits afforded by that inclusion; the latter the individual can reject, while the inclusiveness and the rights it bestows remain outside the purview of the individual to decline.

These assertions may strike a sour tone given Kant's racial views, which time and again contravene this proposed separation of belongingness and belongings by charging racial and national lineages to confer inexorable and frequently execrable dispositions, tendencies, and traits to members of non-white ancestries. Yet in doing so, Kant correlatively attributes, overtly and implicitly, the “individual” right to self-determination as, paradoxically, that afforded by inheritable whiteness. He thus applies the claim that “subjection cannot be inherited” only to inheritors of a particular racial legacy, with the logical consequence that even those coded as European whites are not exempt from or transcend racial legacy; on the contrary, “freedom” comes to signify a benefit afforded in virtue of a *subjection* to white racial belongingness. Rather than the status of the autonomous human relieved of its legacies, liberation indicates, under these conditions, the uptake of ancestral opportunity (what we might see as the implicit conceptual basis for a term like “white privilege”). On this picture, Kant would not be credited as the perpetrator of this ruse so much as one more mortal vehicle through which extends an institutional legacy of reasoning that defines freedom as exemption from inheritance.

The study of inheritance confronts several questions here: is independence from qualities ascribed through inheritable affiliations a self-evident ideal? Could one claim to have an inviolable right to such independence if rights exist only through membership in a rights-bearing classification (say, as *human* rights)? Moreover, are inheritable affiliations truly the enemy of an articulated identity, bringing mostly “bad things” rather than good? And is the liberation of that articulated self contingent on proclaiming that inheritable affiliations of name, culture, ethnicity, and sex are mere accessories that one may slip in and out of—strategically or performatively—through defiant declaration?

Given the contribution of Kant's writings to the formalization of stratified racial difference, it is perhaps ironic that his insistent advocacy of the ability to refuse the meanings of belongingness, itself an arguably racial prerogative, persists so widely as a progressive stance against complicity with hegemonic institutions and meanings. “I am not one of the family,” insists Jacques Derrida, “[which] means: ‘I do not define myself on the basis of my belonging to the family,’ or to civil society, or to the

state [...] I want to keep my freedom always” (Derrida and Ferraris 2001: 27).⁵ This sentiment of wanting to announce one's dissonance with the traditions and conventions of institutional and collective legacies, including distasteful nationalisms and ethnocentrism, is familiar and understandable. Yet it is not clear, to the extent that it is even possible, “disowning” inheritable affiliations places one outside of all such legacies rather than resituates one within different successions of signification and meaning. Here, again, it is to be asked whether inheritance, in fact poses a grave threat to freedom or whether, alternatively, freedom—along with its corresponding concepts of rights, sovereignty, agency, autonomy, etc.—is made possible within and through ancestral descent; whether, within its collective lineages, the individual “loses itself”—becomes emptied—into mere “place and function,” as Derrida proclaims, or whether, perhaps, the self becomes what it is in its peculiar and unpredictable relation to the emplacement and function of its inheritances. If the latter, then the “place and function” of Derrida's racial and other inheritances would be conditional features for his performative disavowal of belonging in the name of freedom: a powerful testament not to his independence but, quite the reverse, to his inheritable affiliations with Kant through a shared philosophical descent.

At the same time, I wonder whether those like Derrida would find such declamations equally progressive with respect to other lineages. Would those who experience liberation in belongingness within queer inheritance, therefore, be asserting a false freedom, if freedom exists only through a refusal of such affiliations? Do the endowments of nationality and civil society dissolve in virtue of their stated renouncement, creating a globally liberated existence that those dispossessed of their homelands and separated from their communities should be congratulated for achieving and encouraged to view as a transcendence into autonomous personhood?

6 Inheritance as Idiomatic

What adds to the challenge of conceiving inheritable transfer as coordinating the appearance and disappearance of features is the manner by which inheritance has often split into purportedly opposing and complementary accounts: “compulsory” inheritance, as what prescribes subjective traits in advance (evolution, geneticism, sexual difference) and “customary” inheritance (e.g., traditions, values, gender), as what supplies the subject features that it may divest itself from by its own or other powers. More important than the expressions articulating this opposition—biological v. social inheritance, innate v. acquired characteristics, predictive v. disruptive attributes—is the conviction that instances of inheritance be consignable to one or the other side of the division. But what characterizes the language of inheritance is its explanation of derivation—a means of ascribing continuity to our ways of being—that is not teleological: that is, what extends neither as an inevitable unfolding (as an ontological property) nor through collective intentionality (e.g., defining structural racism as the additive effect of personal racisms). Inheritance would seem to mark instead chains of endowments and entitlements irreducible to formal causality, happenstance, or an epiphenomenal mixture of such (e.g., epigenetics). An adjustment away from these definitions situates subjects not as pre-existing recipients of bequeathed qualities but as beings conscripted within them: in sum, we might say, inheritance *becomes* us. Rather than guaranteed outcomes, such qualities would indicate connotative proclivities, propensities, tendencies and orientations that enable derisive stereotypes and biases while

simultaneously enabling the shared characteristics of region, profession, religion and class that we celebrate and cherish as providing purposive and meaningful ways of being.

What connects the idioms by which such “changes of belonging” are expressed, like “institutional memory,” “intergenerational trauma,” and “running in the family”—and why I suggest they partake in, if not generate, the rubric of inheritance—is this fidelity to an explanation of the temporal crossing of knowledges, dispositions, and relations that cannot be systematized as an applied methodology rooted in natural forces or self-interests. Imagining inheritable transfers as either compulsory or customary—or some hybrid of an anterior bifurcation—may rather be what prevents us from recognizing the radical articulation subtending these types of statements, and thus to miss how inheritance performs a unique function of effecting and explaining belongingness across mortal experience. This umbrella of expressions I am calling inheritance thus preserves the “impossible moment” of transmission as integral to its meaning rather than an indeterminacy that awaits explanation by science or metaphysics.

Grasping these tropes as active idioms of inheritance seems especially important when considering topics of nationality and race, as well as technology, media, art, education, industry, and communities of knowledge. It is perhaps a sociological and ideological truism to point out that collectives maintain themselves through inheritance: the normalization of procedures, practices, and authoritative statements that occur through ritualized repetition. And yet we do not seem to possess a shared, supple theoretical vocabulary or interdisciplinary framework for these complex discourses of transfer. This undertheorizing has, at a manifest level, made it difficult to conduct thoughtful academic and public conversations about such topics and the endless other endowments in which our “lot” in life awaits us.

7 A Commencing Conclusion

In contemplating these transmissions, it may help to reflect on Frantz Fanon’s notion of “ethical transit” as something of a touchstone. Fanon describes ethical transit as a slippage in black consciousness between two legacies of belonging; one, a belongingness within whiteness and the good, and the other, a belongingness within blackness and evil (Fanon 1967: 191-94). To be black, Fanon theorizes, is to be individuated as a raced subject through two contrasting endowments from the same colonial inheritance. Thus the slippage or transit of inheritance refers both to the passing down of racially supremacist legacies that conscript the black subject as phobic consciousness—one that “assimilate[s] the prejudices” of Europe—and also of the passing of the subject *between* its endowments of racial belonging, an experience Fanon describes as ambivalence, psychopathology, and ethical incomprehensibility.⁶

Fanon thus provides a schematic for the study of inheritance that advocates for its appreciation both laterally and vertically. This requires thinking across and between metaphors of inheritance particular to different areas of study: in his brief section around ethical transit, Fanon signifies inheritance not only through the terms “transitivity” and “assimilation” but also “paternity,” “family likeness,” and the enigmatic “cerebral heredity,” which he quickly rejects and replaces with “cultural imposition,” expressions that draw from psychoanalysis, linguistics, sociology, and evolutionary theory. One goal

for a theory of inheritance then is to unwrap and make explicit the affiliations and disaffiliations between endowments that often go overlooked—for example, to ask why the claim of being financially self-made is critiqued for disavowing inheritable endowments but the claim of ethical self-making is thought to rightly presume this same disavowal, or to examine how the locating of black authenticity and authority in traditions of music and dance—cited by our earlier artist—might be said to equally maintain, as Fanon suggests, a “cultural legacy” for and “cultural imposition” upon black descendants.

My aim has been to provide a preliminary thesis advancing reasons for thinking worthwhile the development of a philosophy of inheritance as inaugurating a larger area of inheritance studies. To this end I have suggested that inheritance operates as distinctive concept in multiple intellectual and colloquial discourses as an irreducible explanatory idiom for processes of transitivity, and offered that inheritance be understood as a historically mobilizing conveyance of knowledges, qualities, and belongings that endows subjects as points of transit. These hypotheses are not to be taken as conclusive declarations but as initiating an invitation—a series of conjectures sufficient to commence a conversation that honors as it rewrites the legacies through which it is itself animated.

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- ¹ On the generational transfer of gay aesthetics and knowledge, see Halperin (2012); on the role of presumed racial and ethnic ancestry on self-identity, see Nelson (2016); on inheritance and educational learning outcomes, see Dixon-Roman (2017).
 - ² Though philosophers of language have pointed out that the success of such exchanges hinge on meeting a host of locutional rituals and contextual conventions, many retain intentionality as the primary condition for that outcome. Inheritable transfer, however, does not require intentionality or will; on the contrary, inheritability suggests that even the motives and desires of intention are not self-evidently less inheritable than locutional rituals and contextual conventions, even if the transfer occurs “spontaneously” in the presence of both “giver” and “receiver.” See Searle (1977).
 - ³ Because the heirloom serves a structural and not ontological function, it is of little consequence whether the exact same object is transferred. Material objects break or are lost or stolen; sacred buildings burn and are rebuilt—but the symbolic continuation of inheritance is just as easily carried out by an anointed surrogate. Inheritance does not begin or end with the production or demise of the thing transferred any more than it does with the birth or death of the individual. Acknowledgements to the students in my 2021 Inheritance seminar at Haverford College (especially Sofia Esner) for their incisive contributions to these ideas.
 - ⁴ See Halliday (2020: esp. Chp. 6).
 - ⁵ See also J. Hillis Miller’s discussion of Derrida’s concept of “singularity” as the subject-as-island or “enisled” in J. Hillis Miller (2007).
 - ⁶ This movement is of particular importance with respect to blackness as “the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world” and thus symbolic of the threshold of non-being that inheritance crosses (Spillers 2003: 155).

Inheriting the Wounds of Injustice: A Response to J. Reid Miller

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In his essay, “What would a Philosophy of Inheritance Look Like?,” J. Reid Miller presents a case for inheritance studies, a field of study that would focus on the philosophy of inheritance, drawing out the varieties of inheritance and what that means for our understanding of human existence. He then proceeds to outline what that kind of investigation would look like—the complexities and considerations involved if this kind of study were to be undertaken. In what follows, I will summarize Miller’s argument, draw out a few of his key points, and then provide a short response that considers the possibility of and the implications for a nation inheriting trauma from its past. For my response to Miller’s discussion, I wish to elaborate using Jewish sources.

Miller’s thesis could be summarized by the following statement:

The reasons for studying inheritance as a collective set of questions reflects these growing convolutions of inquiry that cross multiple sites of disciplinary inquiry while wrestling longitudinally with the movement of affiliative institutional and individual features like entitlements, dispositions, standards, and traits. At stake in these contestations is not just the transfer of resources taken as material “belongings” but the means by which subjects come to inhabit through inheritance their communal endowments as demonstrations of belongingness (Miller 2023a).

What does it mean to inherit? This question contains multiple ways of interpreting “mean”—what counts as inheriting? What is the significance of that inheritance? What kinds of things can be counted as things that are inherited? And what is the significance of those things we claim not to inherit? Within these questions, here are three ways that the general public generally, or typically, and uncritically think about inheritance: economic/legal, biological, and cultural. For example, we pass property (real estate, jewelry, money, and other material possessions) from one person to another; parents pass genetic material to children; we pass language and cultural traditions within families; parents within a shared environment could be said to pass behaviors to their children.

In his essay, Miller asks us to consider the ways in which different kinds of inheritance are brought to bear on our identity. If asking from a raced perspective, “What makes someone really Black?” “How do such attributions of inheritance sustain, interpret, and authorize the kind of beings we take ourselves and others to be?” (Miller 2023a) Miller tells us he’s not asking this question from the standpoint of egalitarian/redistribution perspective but rather from a perspective that asks us to consider “how things, ideas, and beings come into material and non-material attributes through transferable belongingness” (Miller 2023a), although all of these modes of transfer are distinct and generally unrelated to each other. Additionally, Miller astutely observes other kinds of conversation that could be classified within a discourse of inheritance but are generally not identified as such, e.g., cycles of abuse, poverty, addiction, structural injustice, and so forth (Miller 2023a). They both attune us to inheritance as a kind of family resemblance and yet also highlight how different these instances are from other kinds of objects that are transferred from one entity to another. Thus, the question, “What is inheritance?” emerges as a foundational question.

In Miller's words, "A philosophy of inheritance, then, would investigate the means by which we attempt to reason through, explicate, and accord responsibility for these channels of bequeathal, formal and informal" (Miller 2023a). This kind of investigation, Miller believes, would enable us to better understand what we mean when we use phrases like "X runs in the family." Do we mean we have a propensity for a particular disease because our parents and/or grandparents also died of such a disease? Do we mean we have a particular talent, e.g., "you get that dancing ability from your grandmother." What is the transferrable property, and how is it similar to or different from the other ways that we talk about inheritance?

Miller raises interesting questions about when a gift has been given—in the case of inheritance, is the giving of a watch, the transfer of the property, done at the time that it is written on the paper? When it was notarized? Of course, in one sense, that cannot be the case. We know that wills are often changed. The giving of the gift, the transfer, would be like anything else—we would mark it on the date of the transfer, just like the selling of a house when parties sign the deed. In this case, the transfer of the property is according to the will that is in effect on the date of death; it is out in the future. But Miller's point is well-taken insofar as it is unlike the usual gift exchange. Additionally, he raises the question of what counts as property. When we inherit a loved one's jewelry, for example, Miller wonders in what sense the inherited property is "yours." The heirloom (a word with an interesting origin story) is often referred to as "my X's ring," indicating that it may still belong to the deceased.¹ The heirloom, or inheritance of property, signifies a relationship.

The most interesting section of the paper is The Economy of Inheritance, where Miller argues that inheritance happens regardless of intentional giving or receiving. In Miller's words, "Inheritance is not a special instance of exchange but what dissipates the ideal of exchange as a regulable cycle by foreclosing the ability of the law, biology, or politics to definitively determine the ancestor/successor in the say way it does the giver/receiver" (Miller 2023a). There are any number of instances in which we give/receive in ways that resemble inheritance, or a "passing down of X." Teachers pass knowledge to students, and this exchange is governed by other exchanges, tuition, exams, etc. Miller's analysis of the pedagogy relationship is interesting insofar as he identifies the exchange as that which makes me a teacher and the other a student. I am not a teacher until I transfer the knowledge. Interestingly, the European system of graduate work refers to these relationships in familial terms, e.g., *Doktorvater* or *Doktormutter*. And we refer to the "passing down of knowledge," a language that resembles the language we use to discuss other objects that we transfer through inheritance. But the interesting feature of the pedagogy relationship is that, unlike the transfer of an heirloom, I can transfer knowledge while still retaining that knowledge.

Referring to Kant, Miller raises the interesting point about what we inherit. Our usual understanding of inheritance involves the transfer of gifts, of material objects we might want for their monetary value or their sentimental value; it might involve the transfer of wealth or of real property. But what are the negatives that are transferred through inheritance? On the one hand, Miller points out that Kant wants to ensure that an individual is not held accountable for the sins of the fathers, so to speak: subjection cannot be inherited. And in other instances, we don't hold children responsible for their parents' debt, although what they inherit might be considerably reduced if the estate needs to pay bills that had not yet been paid. Yet, is Kant correct?

Certainly, it was the case in the United States individuals born to slaves were themselves declared slaves. Here, subjection was legally inherited. Outside of the legal context, there is another version of belongingness that one may have difficulty disentangling oneself from. On the one hand, those who are born to parents of a privileged group inherit that belongingness and benefit from it. Conversely, those who are born into a disadvantaged group also inherit that belongingness and the negative experiences it confers. There might not be any way around this in a society that is structurally racist or anti-Semitic. We do not typically consider our gender identity to be something that we inherit, even as we inherit biological traits, and yet our gender identity will confer advantages and disadvantages.

As I write this, Hollywood is addressing a nepotism debate in which several actors and actresses who are born into prominent Hollywood families can get movie parts or jobs without having to audition. One could argue that their talent is inherited. One could argue that they are just given the shot to try, which might be a huge advantage over others, but they are nonetheless, in some way or other benefitting from inheriting a family name or what is thought to be a family talent. Miller writes,

Kant correlatively attributes, overtly and implicitly, the “individual” right to self-determination as, paradoxically, that afforded by inheritable whiteness. He thus applies the claim that “subjection cannot be inherited” only to inheritors of a particular racial legacy, with the logical consequence that even those coded as European whites are not exempt from or transcend racial legacy; on the contrary, “freedom” comes to signify a benefit afforded in virtue of a subjection to white racial belongingness. Rather than the status of the autonomous human relieved of its legacies, liberation indicates, under these conditions, the uptake of ancestral opportunity (what we might see as the implicit conceptual basis for a term like “white privilege”). On this picture, Kant would not be credited as the perpetrator of this ruse so much as one more mortal vehicle through which extends an institutional legacy of reasoning that defines freedom as exemption from inheritance (Miller 2023a).

Miller is of course correct in revealing the assumption that Kant makes. But I would also suggest that nations inherit trauma, or at least the wounds of those traumas, and unless addressed, those wounds will get passed down from generation to generation. We see this repeatedly in Jewish sources. We see it in the story of Cain and Abel and again in the story of David and the drought. First, Cain and Abel.²

“Where is Abel your brother?” God questioned. God expected Cain to answer, “I did wrong in killing him and regret my deed.” But instead, Cain brazenly replied, “I was made guardian of field and vineyard. Am I my brother’s keeper? Do I know where he went? You are the Guardian of all creatures, so why should You inquire of me as to his whereabouts?” Cain’s reply also included a subtle reproach to [God]. His words intimated, “You are the Guardian of the universe! Why then did You allow me to kill him?” Cain continues, in this speculative dialogue, “It was You who created me with a yetzer hara [evil inclination]. Then You aroused my jealousy by accepting my brother’s sacrifice. [...] You did not prevent me from killing him. Why do You then blame me?” But God does not accept this argument and tells Cain that he is responsible not only for his brother’s blood but also for the blood of his brother’s unborn offspring.

The line at Genesis 4:10 reads, “What have you done? Hark, your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.” But in the Hebrew text, the word used to indicate Abel’s blood is written in the plural: “bloods.” So, in addition to the victim, there is the matter of progeny, those never to be born. The Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5 tells us that this passage conveys the unique nature of murder: “Whoever

takes a single life destroys thereby an entire world.” Considering the question of whether Cain committed murder, Rashi argues that Cain is guilty of murder, but his punishment is delayed seven generations. The *midrash*, that is, the centuries of collected rabbinic commentary on the Hebrew Bible, claims that Lamech, a direct descendant of Cain, rises up and slays Cain. Responding to this, Rashi claims that the line that reads “Vengeance shall be taken sevenfold” should be understood to mean that God does “not wish to take vengeance on Cain now, but at the end of seven generations [God] will execute [His] punishment upon him, that Lamech, one of his descendants will arise and slay him. [...] Vengeance will be taken in the seventh generation.” A similar point is made by Leora Batnitzky in her essay, “Jewish Vengeance, Christian Compassion?—or the misunderstanding that won't go away.” Batnitzky turns to the figure of Cain, along with several other examples found throughout the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish commentary on it, and she offers an argument about our responsibility for sins of the past.³ It is not that a child should suffer harm because a parent has committed sin. Rather, it is that some deeds are so bad, so horrific, that their effects will reverberate through the generations to come. We will feel those ill effects just as we reap the benefits from the past and hope to pass those benefits to the generations who are not yet born. Certainly, murder is one of those sins, but there are others.

We see a similar view of inheritance—that is, the inheritance of a wrong committed by a member of a family or citizen of a country—in Levinas's retelling of the story of King David and his inability to address the famine in his land.⁴ For help with his task to disclose the issue of forgiveness and justice for a past wrong, Levinas turns to 2 Samuel, which tells of the three-year famine during the time of King David. To sort through this difficult passage, he turns to the Talmudic commentary on this story, and he finds that David would not have waited three years to find out the cause of the famine.⁵ In his searching, David finds that the community is not itself corrupt. There is neither idolatry nor debauchery; no one is breaking promises; there are no empty speeches or inhospitable behaviors. David thus concludes that the famine is not the result of their way of life and thus must be a political wrong. He asks God what the cause of the famine is and gets the strange double answer: “This was because of Saul and the city of blood and because he put the Gibeonites to death” (Levinas 1990: 26). In other words, there had been a wrong committed to the Gibeonites, who were destroyed by Saul, and a wrong done to Saul when he was not granted a royal burial (Levinas 1990: 26-7). It is a wrong, an injustice that has carried forward, that David has, in essence, inherited, and now needs to be addressed.

Yet, there is nothing in the story about the Gibeonites that indicates any violence was done to them directly. Nonetheless, David sends for the Gibeonites and hears their complaints. “Saul made their presence on the land of Israel impossible—they want neither gold nor silver. They have no hatred toward the children of Israel. Instead, they want seven of Saul's descendants to be handed over to them to be put death” (Levinas 1990: 26). David listened to them. He took two sons from Rizpah, daughter of Aiah (Saul's concubine), and five sons from Michal (Saul's daughter), but he took pity on Mephibosheth (Mefivoshet), Jonathan's son. The seven descendants of Saul were then nailed to a rock and left to die. Rizpah stayed with the corpses, covering their bodies and protecting them from the animals that would attack them (Levinas 1990: 26).

For Levinas, the story applies to the question of German guilt, which was part of that year's theme of the Colloquium of Jewish Intellectuals (in Paris). Levinas repeats the midrash, which affirms that “*the crime of extermination begins before the murders take place, that oppression and economic uprooting already indicate its beginnings, that the laws of Nuremberg already contain the seeds of the horrors of the extermination camps and the final*

solution” (Levinas 1990: 27; emphasis in original). In other words, the framework that makes extermination possible is inherited; it is passed down over time. The seeds are planted, the land tilled.

I write these words having just read of the brutal and lethal beating of Tyre Nichols. I did my graduate work in Memphis, Tennessee, and in most of the courses that I taught, I showed my students, *At the River I Stand*, a documentary that covers the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike, which brought Martin Luther King, Jr. to Memphis, where he was assassinated. It is difficult not to draw the line from slavery to the treatment of the sanitation workers, who were mostly Black, to the assassination of MLK, Jr., to the lethal beating of Tyre Nichols. The city has inherited an extraordinary injustice that it has not acknowledged or addressed as if it didn’t read the will when slavery died.

And here I would argue that the Charleston Church Massacre and the everyday violence that is perpetuated upon Black Americans is the result of a nation that has never adequately dealt with the sins of the past, with the trauma of slavery and the wounds that it passes down for seven or more generations. Thus, when Miller quotes Derrida as insisting that “I do not define myself on the basis of my belonging to the family or to civil society or to the state [...]” this seems to be bad faith and one of the reasons nations cannot repair their wounds. It sounds like a more sophisticated version of the general population saying, “But *I* didn’t own slaves.” Or those who emigrated and can add to that statement, *my family* did not own slaves, as if they do not benefit from *not being* born into a formerly enslaved family.

When we consider the idea of inheritance, we typically think of something tangible—a piece of jewelry, the color of our eyes, even a mannerism. We tend not to think of something like the ethos—or foundational structure—of a country that is shaped by a past injustice or trauma. I think that Miller has identified a fruitful object of philosophical investigation, one that has significant ethical and political implications, and I would encourage him to use this investigation to consider inheritance more broadly, that what we pass from one generation to another is not limited to families or even cultural groups, but also nations. And it is because that which a nation inherits is intangible that it frequently goes unnoticed, or not identified as such, and by implication not addressed. We address the symptoms—a police shooting here, discrimination in a job there, a church massacre nearby, but we do not address the originating trauma, wound, or injustice that is passed from generation to generation.

¹ Dating to the 1600s, the etymology of “heirloom” separates the term into “heir” and “loom.” *Loom* refers to a tool—so it was the passing down or transfer of tools, or implements. At the time, this specific heirloom, would have been valuable—if one considers the kind of occupations that people had: sewing, farming, tanning, etc. where the tools to setup a shop would have been costly. It is fascinating to consider that now what is often referred to as an heirloom is typically, though not always, something completely useless, e.g., a piece of jewelry, but usually something to be protected, not used in a manner that would contribute to the wear and tear of the object.

² This discussion of Cain is taken from Katz (2003). The speculative dialogue between Cain and God is from Weissman (1980).

³ Batnitzky (2006).

⁴ Levinas (1990: 12-29).

⁵ Levinas refers to the Talmud, Tractate *Yebamot*, 58b-59a.

Philosophy on Inheritance

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1 Introduction

In analytic political philosophy, discussions of inheritance are confined to questions about inherited wealth and economic justice. The central debate concerns the justification of various taxes (e.g., inheritance, gift, and estate), the proper scope of bequest and inheritance rights, and the social and political significance of wealth inequality.¹ Jerry Miller's "What Would a Philosophy of Inheritance Look Like?" offers a welcome and refreshing change from this focus. Miller approaches the topic as a critical interpretation of inheritance concepts and metaphors in various disciplines and discourses, generating deeper questions than those of economic distribution. Miller's paper provides depth and originality in theorizing inheritance and proposes novel ideas for interdisciplinary inheritance studies.

Philosophical work on inheritance addresses normative moral and political issues surrounding intergenerational transfers of material wealth, property, and the advantages that flow from them. Miller's paper is a game changer for scholarship on inheritance because it invites all disciplines engaging some conception or process of inheritable transfer, for example, in the transmission of genetic traits or class status and power, to venture beyond entrenched topical and methodological constraints. Contemporary academic philosophy, the leader in the humanities for harboring and perpetuating elitist self-conceptions of the appropriate figures, methods, and topics within its purview, has so far fixated on inheritance as a legal and economic activity. Academic philosophy has theorized inheritance from a literalist, legalist interpretation of this concept in neoclassical liberal thought or neoclassical economics.

As Miller points out, this conception of inheritance theoretically concentrates on the capital or financial assets transferred as opposed to the nature of the "mode of transfer." Classical liberal political philosophers had qualms about inheritance and considered it an impediment to economic efficiency, as it diminishes incentives for productive work and accumulation of capital and encourages idleness.² Although Adam Smith questions the grounds for the right to bequeath property and wealth,³ the neoclassical ideal of *homo economicus* holds the rational belief that we cannot take it with us when we die. Within neoclassical liberal thought, bequeathment emerges as a deliberate and calculated behavior of self-interested rational agents looking out for their personal legacies and the well-being of their heirs and successors. The institutions of bequest and inheritance are effective means for rational agents with limited benevolence and sympathy for other individuals to secure better prospects of life and material welfare for immediate descendants, family members, or friends. Academic philosophy is overdue for a richer theorization of inheritance, a conception that is not captive to the transfer of money and wealth between atomic individuals over generations. Most current philosophical work on inheritance employs an economic conception of inheritable transfer, centered on the transmission of financial capital, and revolves around taxation schemes and legal rights of inheritance and bequest.

I am partial to Miller's proposals for theorizing inheritance as an explanation for "how things, ideas, and beings" become what they are through "transferable belongingness." Philosophical ideas, concepts, schools of thought, and movements are commonly cited as belonging to a family of views or a lineage, as having an ancestry or a genealogy, or as producing and participating in legacies. The processes of inheritance or "inheritable passage" are evident in these explanations, but academic philosophy treats inheritance as an economic-legal phenomenon rather than a constitutive feature of philosophy as an enterprise. Inheritance amounts to legal and financial transactions between testators and beneficiaries, a consideration for questions and claims of distributive justice. Bequest is a way for individuals to dispose of capital assets or private property over time, as are *inter vivos* exchanges. Academic philosophy does not reckon with conceptions of descent and inheritance as integral components in assigning continuity to traditions, styles of philosophy, and canons. Miller's overture for inheritance studies prepares the ground for academic philosophers to proceed with this analysis.

I predict reluctance from many professional academic philosophers to Miller's invitation to theorize inheritance metaphorically and not simply as an intergenerational transfer of capital and opportunities, however. This would be a symptom of a methodological shortcoming of professional philosophy in the Anglo-American world, favoring normative claims over creative textual exegesis. Miller's approach to the topic does not conform to the recognized questions or problems of inheritance that boil down to inherited wealth and normative taxation. That is the virtue of Miller's work; it is innovative. Academic philosophy, in which analytic approaches to philosophy prevail, is not as receptive to collaboration across the humanities as Miller's inheritance studies require; it is preoccupied with upholding prestige hierarchies and jealous mimicry of the research model in the natural sciences. The boutique research specializations, the pretensions to clear and precise arguments, and the assumed sanctity of established scholarship and monopoly on methodological rigor that academic philosophy prides itself on may be obstacles to the contributions of analytic political philosophers working on inheritance. Whatever the consequences of the discipline's identity neuroses are, the prevailing philosophical debate on inheritance does not embrace the type of critical textual analyses and interpretations that are central to Miller's conjectures. Analyzing theories of inheritance within philosophical accounts or as implied in idioms such as "cycles of poverty, abuse, and addiction" is not something that contributors in the debate on inheritance and the larger culture of academic philosophy seem prepared for or in the business of doing. Inviting academic philosophers to read carefully to parse "the language of succession" in an exclusionary research ecosystem may be a tall order. The discipline is wary of any project that departs from the well-worn paths of existing research. Inheritance denotes inherited wealth and property in most philosophical scholarship on the topic, but there should be room for theorizing inheritance as an explanatory concept for how "belonging and belongingness happen" in different academic discourses.

2 Social and Natural Lotteries

Academic philosophers are hesitant to analyze the language of inheritance in philosophical works, perhaps consigning Miller's proposals to an exercise in hermeneutics rather than normative political philosophy, can contribute to an inheritance study. This entails theorizing inheritance as more than an intergenerational testamentary exchange. I offer an example of substantial inheritance metaphors from analytic political philosophy that suggest the process of economic inheritance is not reducible to

private exchanges between self-interested agents in market society, metaphors in which the processes of economic, biological, and cultural inheritances conceptually converge. The metaphors of the “social and natural lotteries”⁴ in distributive justice discourses rely on thick conceptions of descent and inheritance, formally comparing our *inherited* class position, historical conditions, physical attributes, psychological propensities, natural talents and abilities, and family and social circumstances, to the contingencies of a game of chance. These social and personal endowments bind us to a species, past and future persons (i.e., biological and non-biological ancestors and descendants), families, communities, institutions, political orders, and cultural, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups. The function of these metaphors is to explain that these inheritances are the provenance of luck and that the benefits or burdens we incur from them are morally arbitrary. They are not endowments to which we can consent or refuse, let alone merit or deserve. Our life prospects are strongly influenced but not decisively determined by these inheritances.

We can count the “social and natural lotteries” as distinctive metaphors of inheritance from mainstream political philosophy. In the debate about distributive justice and luck, these metaphors concern attributes that are not matters of choice, and not factors that we can be responsible for coming into, but which produce deep inequalities. The endowments that we inherit via these lotteries point to processes of inheritance that are beyond agential control and the formal legal means involved in passing on wealth and economic status. We become who we are in relation to others by the qualities and features that we inherit, or the proverbial cards that we are dealt, in keeping the metaphor of a lottery, as our inheritances are the bases of commonalities in religious, class, and racial backgrounds, places of birth, upbringings, and pursuits and occupations that we have talents or propensities for. Individuals and groups are distinguished and associated by the socioeconomic, genetic, cultural, and historical legacies that they inherit. The inheritances that we attribute to luck or social and natural fortune explain “belongingness across mortal experience,” even if a dyed-in-the-wool Rawlsian, or some other exemplar of an analytic approach to political philosophy, balks at this type of interpretive gloss.

All academic fields make recourse to ideas of inheritance in their jargon and industry terms. Professional academic philosophy may hesitate to undertake the metaphilosophical labor needed for analyzing the “expressions of inheritance” in philosophical texts. Rather than belaboring this point, I will elaborate on the feature of Miller’s proposal for examining inheritance as a “collective set of questions” that I find most promising, even if analytic academic philosophers do not emerge from their research echo chambers to pitch in.

3 Inheritance that Transcends Wealth and Ownership

In mainstream scholarship on inheritance, bequeathment is theorized as an intentional and voluntary act of giving, but inheritance is not, as we do not typically choose the amount of wealth or type of property (e.g., intellectual property, in copyrights or patents, commercial real estate, or a personal Pez dispenser collection) that we inherit. This economic conception of inheritance, as Miller notes, reduces inheritable transfer to the transmission of resources over space and time. Inherited wealth and property carry significance that this view does not fully capture, as the inheritors or beneficiaries reap the course of a family history, a class situation, and opportunities or expectations that attend material capital. If we make fine conceptual distinctions between inherited attributes, there are qualitative

differences between things such as tastes, predilections, knowledge, racial, cultural, and sexual traits, but all these endowments place individuals within intersecting matrices of meaning (following Miller, “mortal relations”) that define them and their aims and purposes. Inheritance phenomena, from the intergenerational transmission of a DNA sequence, altruistic behavior (an epigenetic inheritance), and money overlap in this way. The ideal of the self-made individual of the classical liberal tradition, the individual that should be free to profit materially and economically from its labor, efforts, natural assets, and all that it *owns*, loses its philosophical moorings in this relational matrix. The subject of material inheritances is recovered from the “kingdom of mythological zoology” (Dewey 2000: 27), in which it is the bearer of private ownership rights prefigured in the natural world. Miller’s view of inheritance removes inheritance phenomena from “an arbitrational context of negotiation, consent, agreement and refusal.” I take this to be of great philosophical importance.

Miller conceptually divorces inheritance from proprietary ownership that applies to endowments we take to own in some sense. This has implications for the debates on inherited wealth, taxation, and justice, the principle of self-ownership, and property rights. Miller’s example of the process of inheriting a watch points the way. *Stewardship* is not a concept that those invested in natural rights of private property say a neo-Lockean or right-libertarian of some stripe, would be comfortable with.⁵ Inheritance, however, bestows a fleeting relationship between the inheritor and the inherited, *not* the permanence entailed in the neoclassical liberal idea of private ownership. We do not, in a literalist sense of the legal institution of common law private ownership, own our inheritances, from the oil wealth of a wildcatter ancestor to the traits we chalk up to heredity, such as a tendency for risk-taking behavior. We come into these endowments and pass them on. According to Miller, we may come into possession of a deceased person’s watch through formal legal norms or channels of bequest as a lineal descendant, but the watch can only become ours because we do not have “full proprietary ownership” of it—the watch *endures* as our relative’s watch, although in our possession, *belonging* to us for a historical time-slice as it will belong to our successors. Inheritance is conceptually wedded to mortality and impermanence, on Miller’s account, even when bequeathers or donors and inheritors coexist. We are but “points of transit” for the inheritances and “mortal vehicles” for inheritance, as Miller claims. The terms and concepts that we have inherited from jurisprudence do not exhaust accounts of the phenomenon of intergenerational transfers of property, in this case, or inheritance phenomena.

On Miller’s account, the inheritance of artifacts or material objects is not sufficiently explained by the modern conception of private ownership we find in common law jurisprudence and political philosophy. Ownership rights and obligations concerning physical and intellectual property, say, an antique credenza or a biotechnological patent, can outlast an owner’s existence, and the transference of ownership and property rights to other individuals in life or upon death leads to philosophical puzzles. Miller’s view of inheritance picks out the temporal and transitory nature of the relationship of persons to any endowment. Miller’s phenomenology of inheritance describes inherited personal effects and artifacts as always belonging to *subjects of possession*, even if they are owners of holdings according to property law within a legal system. Theorizing inheritance within the conception of institutionalized private property in systems of positive law tethers analyses to questions of ownership and exclusion, ignoring mortality and transience as some of the basic conditions for inheritance phenomena. Material objects come to belong to persons via processes that, from the point of view of the universe, transcend the atomized individualism and philosophical assumptions of the system of private property ownership.

Historical liberal Western inheritance systems are founded on a theory of ownership in which the owner's private authority to exclusive control, use, and management of the owned, whether it is other beings or portions of the external world, have precedence. Miller's understanding of inheritance upends this theory of ownership, as it conceptualizes owners as *superintendents*, changing the form of ownership relations from that of "sole and despotic dominion"⁶ over material inheritances to that of minding or looking after them within the mortal order. Miller's proposal theoretically minimizes the formal structure of individual legal ownership in inheritance, and with that, the personal aspects of property for the impersonal (i.e., an inheritor's property rights and duties, *qua* inheritors, are contingent and perdure beyond the transfer of possession).⁷ We ephemerally possess or tend to the inherited objects but do not own them other than in a thin conventional sense. As the philosophy of law lacks a robust theory of property, there are radical potentials for reimagining proprietary ownership of inherited wealth, real property, and productive assets, according to a conception of mortal stewardship consistent with Miller's view on material inheritance.

4 Inherited Natural Assets

Some traits and capacities are conceived and explained as acquired through the natural or genetic lottery, a frame of inheritance, and flourish or are stunted according to social and family circumstances. These are considered inherited traits, the traits construed as native endowments and natural talents and gifts, within the history of Western philosophy. We ascribe native endowments to the evolutionary past of hominids, or nearer ancestors and relatives, their realization traced to a combination of the transmission genes and social and historical conditions. Colloquially and theoretically, we may explain the talents to play basketball professionally or to be a hedge fund manager, for example, as epigenetic or extra-genetic inheritances in that the composite of skills and abilities to perform these occupations requires the information in DNA *and* the cultural and material circumstances in which subjects are reared and encouraged to fulfill them. (Subjects must exist at a historical convergence of numerous factors where their endowments gain recognition and are socially or institutionally valued in some way, as we exist at a juncture in which dunking a basketball or managing capital assets for high- and ultra-high-net-worth individuals are.)

It may be fitting to explain or account for natural assets as epigenetic inheritances from some theoretical or disciplinary standpoint, but this analysis is wanting for a philosophy of inheritance. Inherited natural endowments are reduced to single intergenerational occurrences and atomic individuals with formal causes and ends. I join Miller in hoping to shed (or at least bracket) theoretical constraints and approach inheritance phenomena in non-reductionist ways that account for the significance for persons and institutions of framing certain qualities, character traits, and dispositions to feel and think in certain ways, as inherited.

Miller's distinctive approach to theorizing inheritance and the questions that it prompts (especially for the self-determining liberal individual and the inclusion and prerogatives imparted by racial legacy, "white racial belongingness," which cannot be disowned) should invigorate academic philosophers bored of debates on inherited wealth and just taxation. Count me as one. Elaborating on Miller's view of inheritable transfer and ownership, we can dare pose the question of whether we philosophically own our putative natural endowments or if they, like the inheritable transfer of material objects or

belongings, defy the logic of market and commercial exchange. As we did not acquire our natural endowments by theft, coercion, or fraud but by processes of biological and social luck, some claim that we are morally entitled to them and the products of their use, having ownership rights over our persons. Possessing these natural assets does not violate another's rights or entitlements, even if we do not deserve or merit them from a moral point of view. Any inequalities of wealth or property that arise from them and pool over generations are justified. This is the thesis of self-ownership.⁸ As biology and law are unable to explain or justify the bare phenomenon of inheritance in Miller's view, there is no reason to which neoclassical liberal notions of moral agency and private ownership rights are better suited. Many consider the principle of self-ownership to have an "intuitive" appeal, but this suggests the internalization of neoliberal values and the corresponding disposition to read extensive legal protections for private property into the natural order. Assumed natural endowments resist moral and legal entitlement altogether, as we may be considered *repositories* for material and non-material inheritances on Miller's theory.⁹

5 Conclusion

Miller's outline for a philosophy of inheritance theoretically dissociates the phenomena of inheritable transfer from "contractual relations of exchange and property." I find this to be the compelling feature of a potential inheritance studies as it upsets the applecart of philosophical work on inheritance that analyzes it as strictly an economic phenomenon, an aspect of normative political economy, or occasionally as a biological and genetic issue.¹⁰ Theorizing inheritance abstractly and metaphorically as bestowing belongingness and not as a "simple, untextured causeway" of intergenerational transmissions of money, legal property, genetic information, traits, or skills may cause reservation on the part of some academic philosophers to take up Miller's suggestions. This would be a squandered opportunity to enrich the scope of future scholarship on inheritance and to spur academic philosophy to reconsider its literal-minded approach to inheritance phenomena. The injunction for literality is, at bottom, a feature of the discipline's escapist tendencies and methodologies, as the meanings of inheritance concepts such as "legacy of slavery" or "legacy of white supremacy" are minimized or lost if explained reductively. Analyzing these concepts in terms of transferring material resources or opportunities does not account for the heritage of knowledge formations resisting racial oppression, for example. The stakes for studying questions and explanations of inheritance in the multifaceted way that Miller proposes are high.

¹ See, for example, Halliday (2013, 2018); Brassington (2019) and Pedersen and Bøynum (2020).

² Locke, Smith, and Mill are caricatured as cheerleaders for corporate capitalism and the system of private property rights that we have in contemporary western market societies. This is grossly inaccurate. Locke, for example, does not posit the primacy of a *natural* right to bequeath wealth or property beyond the needs of one's immediate descendants; bequest and succession rights are matters of civil law and bequeathed property entitlements are subject to estate taxes for the public interest, including to keep others from poverty. See Waldron (1981). Mill, for example, endorses a right to bequeath wealth and property but proposes a progressive inheritance tax and a cap on the amount of wealth one could inherit to limit dynastic concentrations of wealth and property. Mill also views inherited fortunes as

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- encouraging idleness. See Holland (2022). For an overview of classical liberal views on inheritance see chapter 2 of Halliday (2018).
- ³ Adam Smith argues for abolishing the laws of primogeniture and entail in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) to mitigate the effects of vast inequalities of wealth and landed property. See: Walraevens (2021). Smith questions the normative grounds for the justification of bequest rights and testamentary disposition in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (1763): “There is no point more difficult to account for than the right we conceive men to have to dispose of their goods after death. For at what time is it that this right takes place [?]” (Smith 1763: 63).
- ⁴ These metaphors are famously employed by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1971).
- ⁵ I believe that the idea of joint ownership or stewardship over the Earth, based on a medieval model of mortal stewardship where ownership over objects in the extrapersonal world is conceived as temporary, is consistent with Miller’s view on inheritance and ownership. This opposes the model of a natural right of property, grounded in a right of self-ownership, a non-interference right for individuals to acquire and control objects in the extrapersonal world. Eric Mack distinguishes the former conception as “a natural right to property” (Mack 2010: 54). Locke’s theory of property may support both views. See Schwarzenbach (1988).
- ⁶ See Blackstone (1765).
- ⁷ I have in mind the fleeting rights heritors have *just as heritors*, which abstracts away from the personal traits and projects of the heritors, and focuses on the impersonal aspects of property relations, those of a given heritor. On this distinction, see Essert (2013).
- ⁸ My account of the idea of self-ownership is derived from Nozick’s entitlement theory of justice in chapter 7 of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974), 168-69.
- I find resonance between Miller’s conceptualization of persons as “subjects of belonging” and Michael Sandel’s conception of individuals as “repositories of [natural] assets.” According to Sandel, these natural assets do not belong to the heritor, as an individual, or to the political community as a common asset, contrary to how Rawls regards the distribution of natural talents and gifts. No one has a title or claim to their use. This view informs my reading of Miller’s discussion of material inheritance. See Sandel (1998: 97-8).
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Pigliucci and Muller (2010).

Inheritance Beyond Wealth: A Commentary on J. Reid Miller's Invitational Overture

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Philosophical discussions about inheritance predominantly revolve around issues of wealth: whether it is about the legitimacy of bequeath, how much the latter should be taxed, or, more generally, about what constitutes the ethical bases of the just acquisition and distribution of economic benefits. But what is notable about these questions is that they all center around the normative dimensions of intergenerational transfers of riches and affluence. And although the scope of the scholarship is wide-ranging, it is striking to note that it rests on a series of assumptions that are seldom challenged or even scrutinized—at least in analytic political philosophy, which dominates academic debates about inheritance and bequest. These include, most significantly, the colonial, imperial, and slave-trade origins of Western nation-states and their ongoing involvement in neocolonial practices of appropriation, dispossession, and extraction. This is especially remarkable given that most scholars in this field of study, if not all, confine their analyses to the context of ‘developed’ western countries. The prevalence of liberalism in political philosophy partly explains this disregard, given the tendency of liberal theory to sidestep historical structures and processes, and hence to neglect the significance of arguments that are grounded in past events in favor of so-called pure normative principles (see Forrester 2019: esp. 135, 138, 176, 153, 274).

But there are countless other ways in which inheritance is implicitly discussed in political theory and philosophy. This is particularly the case when it comes to questions about identity that focus on cultural practices and beliefs, and more specifically on the conditions that nurture and sustain them, on memory and associated psychic wounds and traumas and how these are transmitted, as well as how collectives strive to short-circuit such transmissions (to name only a few examples). This is where J. Reid Miller's contribution lies: there is a pressing need for interdisciplinary reflection on methodological questions about processes of “succession [and secession] of signification and meaning” (Miller 2023a)—that is, about inheritance beyond issues of wealth and the benefits and burdens that their (un)just distribution entails. Part of the aim of the exercise proposed by J. Reid Miller is thus to render explicit that which is taken for granted in the broader study of inheritance with the purpose of critically examining the premises and presuppositions that are embedded in the vocabularies through which political philosophers and theorists commonly make sense of these transmissions. This kind of exercise involves inquiring into both the normative and political implications of belonging, thereby opening avenues for finer-grained analyses of what is at stake in these debates. This invites an interdisciplinary dialogue on questions such as: What does it mean for both individuals and groups to be part of a tradition? When is it warranted to opt out of these chains of endowments? What are the conditions of possibility of exit, and what are its costs? What kind of agency can individuals and collectives exercise in relation to their inheritances?

Providing tentative answers to these questions requires developing conceptual tools and normative frameworks that can lead to better understandings of succession and heritage in relation to how peoples' identities are constituted and shaped. It also allows us to gain more clarity on issues that are interconnected to—and yet most often studied separately from—processes of inheritance, such as what constitutes ‘appropriation’ and what makes it distinct from ‘imposition.’ One of J. Reid Miller's main goals is thus to provide the basis for a discussion of the sort of agency involved in how people navigate these legacies of meaning, which is something that expresses itself most clearly in the tension

that arises between the assignation of value to both self-making and adhering to a tradition as well as carrying it forward. Given the hold that ideals of independence, autonomy, and the attendant valorization of individuality have on modern modes of making sense of ‘ourselves,’ there is a tendency to situate these lines of inheritance within the bounds of decision-making and choice. At the same time, western societies have been witnessing the increasing presence of claims framed in terms of community and authenticity, which in turn rely upon commitments to recognize, celebrate, and sustain belongingness.

These are the kinds of puzzles raised by J. Reid Miller in his thought-provoking piece, which, as he convincingly demonstrates, demand interdisciplinary inquiry to arrive at more comprehensive explanations of how these transfers take place (or not) and why.¹ Another move that is needed here, according to the author, is to entangle the different domains of inheritance and study them together in order to “reason through” and figure out ways of “accord[ing] responsibility for these channels of bequeathal” (Miller 2023a). And yet, Reid Miller insists that the multiple forms through which inheritance functions are independent of intentionality and free will—in other words, it “persists independent of our wish for it to do so and in ways beyond our ability to administer it” (Miller 2023a). What this means is that the sort of responsibility that he takes to be assignable exceeds the individual subject of inheritance: it is in and through patterns, processes, and nexus of endowments rather than on a person’s actions, capacities, and characteristics, that it is possible to pinpoint a sense of agency in the passing of inheritance.²

This is where some of the crucial problems arise regarding the political and psychological implications of belongingness: if it is not possible for individual agents to disavow lineages of inheritance, how can they short-circuit the transmission of trauma and the perpetuation of oppression? And how can they contribute to the revitalization and resurgence of traditions and forms of life that were nearly extinguished by colonization, slavery, and genocide? Who is to be held accountable for past and present forms of subjugation, domination, and exploitation?

There are, of course, no unambiguous answers to these questions, and it is not the author’s goal to attempt to point to any straightforward solutions or guidelines in this “invitational overture” (Miller 2023a). The problems considered in the text are much too complex, diverse, and cover too broad a scope to allow one to provide tentative responses to them. The piece does a masterful job of depicting the area of study that it invites us to reflect upon, as well as setting the bases for fruitful and constructive conversations and analyses that necessarily extend beyond disciplinary boundaries. Of course, each field of inquiry requires specific research frameworks and methods, which is why it is difficult to have an abstract discussion on the question of lineages as such—that is, irrespective of the unique context within which the lineage in question unfolds. Perhaps this is part of the reason why an overview of these kinds of processes of transitivity leads to the kinds of dilemmas identified by the author, such as when the agency exercised by inheritors appears to both enable and undermine ‘freedom’ (Miller 2023a). This is to say that different “processes of transitivity” (Miller 2023a) pose different problems that should not necessarily be interpreted using the same tools or for the same purpose. Let me illustrate this with two sets of examples that can hopefully contribute to the direction of an ongoing conversation that honors the spirit of J. Reid Miller’s take on inheritance as a distinct field of study.

The first example I would like to draw on is the prevalent and taken-for-granted trope of Euro-western inheritance. By this, I mean both the presumption of superiority of Western ‘civilization’, as well as

the widely held belief that Western identity has always existed in some form. The latter is paradigmatic of what Quentin Skinner refers to as the “mythology of prolepsis,” which corresponds to the attribution of retrospective significance to past events—or to the assumption of the prior existence of something in order to explain this thing’s purported coming into being (Skinner 2020: 73). This is the case of the western imaginary, which is based on the postulate that there is a distinctive tradition, culture, and experience shared by a particular set of peoples who have always³ situated themselves within the same particular lineage. As the standard story would have it, this Western ‘civilization’ finds its origins in Ancient Greece and somehow evolved seamlessly and on its own—that is, uninfluenced by external forces—into what is today known as the North Atlantic world. Now, even though it is, of course, true that there is such thing as a characteristically Western tradition, the latter did not grow organically from the classical period in Athens to today’s group of countries associated with ‘the West.’ This way of telling the story obviates the crucial impact of so-called non-western cultures on the formation and evolution of what is now said to belong to ‘the west.’ This is particularly the case with ‘philosophy,’ whose development is assumed to have followed a linear sequence that moved from Ancient Greek to Medieval Latin and then Modern European to Contemporary Western philosophy (see, e.g., Dussel 2020: 20).

Another significant issue here is that this narrative erases both the sources of knowledge that had a profound influence on the origins of philosophy as a discipline—such as those that the Greeks found in Ancient Egypt—and the continuous interactions that have shaped and defined these various strands of thought which are constitutive of the so-called western tradition.⁴ These interactions include, for instance, the reception of Ancient Greek thinkers in the Islamic world and the subsequent influence of Islamic interpretations of these works (of Aristotle in particular) in the Medieval Latin world, as well as the expansion of European navigation along the Atlantic since 1492 (made possible, among other things, by Chinese and Arab innovations in navigation technologies), and the encounter with Mesoamerican worlds from the early sixteenth century onwards⁵ (to mention only a few). What is significant to highlight here is that these connections were integral to larger processes of colonialism and imperialism, which flowed from the transatlantic slave trade and the invasion, appropriation, and subjugation not only of humans but also of “ecosystems, matter and energy” (Candiani 2014: xv). All this is intrinsically tied to the patterns of historical progress, rational development, and modernization, which are taken to be simultaneously Western and universal (see, e.g. Bhambra 2009).

The claim of ‘Western inheritance’ is thus problematic on several grounds, but it is particularly so when articulated within and outside of the academy to construe a common descentance from a curated ancestral past to undergird a singular, unparalleled, and superior identity. This conception of the West as both the center and the end of universal history⁶ has served—and continues to serve—to justify and legitimize ethnocentrism, racism, speciesism, and other hierarchies of moral worth that place ‘civilized’ white masculinity above the rest of existence (see e.g., Sharp and Taylor 2016). Hence the importance of working to provide careful analyses and counternarratives that can decenter the dominance of the deeply harmful features of this dominant conceptualization of Western identity, as well as challenge the spread of its institutions and practices on the ground.

The other example I would like to mention here is the struggle for the resurgence and revitalization of Indigenous systems of knowledge and ways of relating to the Earth, particularly in what is today known as Canada (see e.g., Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2014; Simpson 2017, among many others), where I am writing these pages. Indigenous forms of knowing and being have been subject to systemic processes of erasure—ranging from assimilation to genocide—since the beginning of colonization in

the continent in the sixteenth century and continuing to this day in the form of settler- and neo-colonialism (see e.g., Greer 2018). The purpose of the multifaceted project of Indigenous resurgence and revitalization is to work towards radical, transformative change in both theory and practice. This involves protecting and caring for the lands, waters, and more-than-human inhabitants that Indigenous peoples coexist with, in addition to resisting further encroachments, including 'land grabs' and other forms of dispossession (see e.g., Jurkevics 2021 and Nichols 2020, respectively). This corresponds to 'decolonization' as articulated by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, which requires, above all, the need to "brin[g] about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" (Tuck and K. Wayne Yang 2012: 21). And it is important to understand that this not only refers to the demand that settler states deoccupy colonized territories but also to the broader agenda of recovering the traditions of thought and action that colonizers sought to destroy. This is what Tuck and Yang mean when they write that decolonization must necessarily involve "the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, *all* of the land, and not just symbolically" (Tuck and K. Wayne Yang 2012: 7; emphasis in original).

It is, therefore possible to understand Indigenous resurgence as a project that seeks to resituate peoples within legacies of belonging whose existence has been under severe threat of extinction. Hence the focus on the land-based revitalization and regeneration of languages, teachings, oral histories, and legal orders, among other aspects that are constitutive of their cosmogonies and forms of life (see e.g., Asch, Borrows, and Tully 2018). As I understand it, then, the goal of Indigenous resurgence and revitalization is to nurture, foster, and sustain what J. Reid Miller refers to as processes of relational inheritance. We can also see clear resonances with Kristie Dotson's work on Black theoretical production, especially with how she conceives of "acts of inheritance" as "serving our people by *actively* existing in a cultural and social life larger than ourselves" (Dotson 2013: 42). This is what her notion of "radical love" implies: it is the Black scholar's commitment to both become a successor of a tradition in deeply hostile contexts, and to throw themselves "into the next century for future acts of inheritance" (Dotson 2013: 43). In other words, performing acts of inheritance entails the maintaining of everything that forms part of who they are as Black or Indigenous peoples, which involves repairing—and sometimes recreating previously lost—realities, spaces, and identities that persist despite ongoing colonial and racist legacies.

This brings me to a last point I would like to stress here, which is about the contrast between the first and the second example. The idea of Western inheritance has been defined and upheld in ways that have been directly responsible for the assimilation, appropriation, and erasure of traditions, knowledges, practices, languages, and laws that exceed the bounds of modernity. What drives this ethos of mastery is a self-understanding that posits the Western imaginary as superior, which is what vindicates its power to classify and engulf all other onto-epistemic orientations to the world. But as I noted above, underpinning the idea of a specifically Western inheritance is the false claim that it rests on a series of idiosyncratic achievements—philosophical, scientific, cultural, political, etc.—that would somehow confirm the genius of the West. This is why one of the most important goals of decolonial and anti-racist theory is to unsettle and deparochialize lineages of belonging that are inherently destructive.⁷ And again, this is not to say that there is no place for modern, western imaginaries; on the contrary, the aim is to make room for a deep plurality of lineages (within and beyond the West) that can coexist and perpetuate their legacies harmoniously and peacefully. But this requires the fostering and nurturing of processes of transitivity that can enable the sort of self-reflection that is needed to counter colonial, imperial, racist, masculinist, and other dominant and domineering projects and dispositions.

To conclude this short excursion into the study of inheritance as proposed by J. Reid Miller's essay, I would like to emphasize the need to pay special attention to power as well as to the structures through which power is exercised and maintained. Taking heed of oppression and domination when studying chains of endowments and entitlements is what allows us to attune a theory of inheritance to the question of how injustices and inequalities are reproduced, which includes but extends beyond intergenerational wealth transfers. As J. Reid Miller has convincingly shown, the idea is not to separate different domains of inheritance and study them apart; rather, the aim is to bring to light the interconnections and entanglements among different kinds of 'things' (material and immaterial) that are transmitted or not and why. Because just as egalitarian political philosophers argue that the inheritance of economic power is morally unjustified, an adequate theory of inheritance should allow us to challenge the assimilation and erasure of traditions and orientations to the world and expose the ways in which the latter is connected to the former. It should also provide us with tools that can unsettle the imposition of a curated image of Western modernity disguised as the inevitable path of 'progress' towards the universal betterment of humankind. Finally, it should allow us to show instead how this hegemonic image of 'the West' is actually responsible for producing and legitimizing deep structural inequalities and systemic injustices throughout the globe.

¹ This is to say that philosophical reflection alone—if there is even such a thing—cannot provide adequate and comprehensive answers to questions about inheritance beyond wealth. Moving beyond partial and idiosyncratic analyses of the multiple forms through which inheritance functions involves inquiry and collaboration across disciplines and fields of study such as history, anthropology, archaeology, sociology, psychiatry, cultural studies, postcolonial and decolonial theory, among many others.

² As J. Reid Miller's text shows, the scholarship on 'inheritance' overwhelmingly relies on the assumption that the giver(s), recipient(s), refuser(s) (etc.) of inheritance is an individual subject—or a collective, composed of individual subjects. Reid Miller's proposal is to shift the focus of analysis from this atomistic outlook to an approach that is attuned to relations and interactions instead.

³ Or at least since the Greek classical period (fifth and fourth centuries BCE).

⁴ For a similar discussion but on the construction of the western legal tradition, see Berman (1983: esp. 1-45).

⁵ In this regard, see Carballo (2020: esp. 118-25).

⁶ See also Dussel, quoting Hegel, in (Dussel 1993: 71).

⁷ James Tully's work is exemplary in this regard. See e.g. Tully (2016).

Strange Routes: A Reply

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I first wish to warmly thank the journal editors for arranging this forum on the viability of an interdisciplinary area of inheritance studies and the role and responsibilities that would accrue to philosophy in its development and realization. I extend my deepest appreciation to the three respondents—Fernando Zapata, Didier Zúñiga, and Claire Katz—for conscientiously responding to my overture as an invitation to reflect on this new, broader formulation of inheritance. My modest hope in “What Would a Philosophy of Inheritance Look Like?” (hereafter abbreviated *WWPI*) was that this foregrounding of inheritance itself, rather than any objects of transit, held merit as a “concept operating in multiple intellectual and colloquial discourses as an irreducible explanatory idiom for processes of transitivity.” I am grateful that my interlocutors generously entertained this thought experiment, providing demonstrations that amplify an anchor essay largely restricted to axiomatic and structural claims. In their animation of critical instances where lines of belongingness are both enacted and disavowed, these responses—more than illustrate this cross-disciplinary theory of inheritance—expand the contours of what such a theory must encompass and chart pathways for future research in what I hope will become a distinctive and growing field.

In this reply, I highlight what strike me as pressing questions raised in these responses, not to formalize them as the primary quandaries for inheritance studies but as exemplary of the opportunities for radical theoretical and phenomenological realignments that result from reading inheritance critically across existing discourses. While I agree with the respondents that such a paradigm shift promises significant political implications, I am here more interested in the novel constellation of questions that inheritance studies poses, specifically, as open-ended possibilities that, as Zúñiga and Katz suggest, have no predetermined resolution outside historically contingent ways of being. Politics, therefore, need not be the immediate or most generative domain in which to contemplate inheritable transfer as a discourse no less conditioned by such transfers. As *WWPI* contends, a notion like freedom is not an intrinsic telos of human nature but a presumed entitlement of a historical (and racial) heritage. This makes the political just as beholden to an expansive study of inheritance. Any consideration of how inheritance studies might be employed to adjust a particular lineage—or provide any intellectual project a means to an already given objective (e.g., to authenticate genetic descent)—must first await the development of this as-yet undertheorized discourse of inheritance across all fields. My goal in *WWPI* was to stress the need for a profound elasticity of inquiry at this inchoate stage, one that pursues without resolution the multiple logics and characteristics of inheritance (such as non-propriety) that render it an enigmatically different account not only of how belongings and belongingness transfer across non-being, but, thereby of how fundamental philosophical concepts like causality, intention, properties, and identity might begin to be rethought if not edged further into historical decline.

Enacting this interdisciplinary venture requires that we *estrangle* inheritance by undoing its disciplinary domestication as a vacant procedural in the way that the linguistic turn rejected language as a mere conveyor of thought-content and thus restored its confounding nature as well as disclosed those modes in which it has always resisted its delimiting as a pure vessel of transfer. This estrangement is what Zapata's essay accomplishes in its piercing attention to how classical political theory attempts to narrow and mechanize inheritance under Western analytics. Within this agoraphobic disciplinarity, Zapata contends, “bequeathment emerges as a deliberate and calculated behavior of self-interested

rational agents looking out for [...] their heirs and successors,” thereby “ignoring mortality and transience as some of the basic conditions for inheritance phenomena” (Zapata 2023). As an example, Zapata shares the prevalent theory of “self-ownership,” which holds that we are “morally entitled” to discriminatory use of endowments acquired through the “social or natural lotteries” of random chance. In response, Zapata submits that we “dare pose the question of whether we philosophically own our putative natural endowments, or if they, like the inheritable transfer of material objects or belongings, defy the logic of market and commercial exchange” (Zapata 2023).

And dare we should. Zapata is correct, I think, to find the parameters of this debate on self-ownership and related disputes misleading and “philosophically boring.” The question of self-ownership of talents like, to borrow Zapata's examples, managing financial assets or dunking a basketball is politically salient insofar as those endowments are valuable commodities within the capitalist inheritance “of market and commercial exchange.” Would “self-ownership”—or even the political itself—be equally legible here regarding abilities to roll one's tongue or find four-leaf clovers? This exemplifies the earlier point that the political arises within the terms of an inheritance rather than as what arbitrates between inheritances. This is because the political surfaces on the presumption of an end or objective for such endowments—here, the “rational preservation” of one's imagined “heirs and successors” in perpetuity—whereas no organic or given telos engineers inheritable transfer. From *WWPI*: “There is nothing [an inheritance] is destined to do or preserve, and is not invested even in its own continuance.”

What would it mean, I take Zapata to be asking, for political philosophy to think its own “tradition” *within* parameters of inheritance rather than as *outside* governing it? To do this, it would have to ask how “self-ownership” could signify as a coherent notion when ownership under inheritance must harbor an internal dissonance (that a trait/object be both mine and not mine) for the sake of its continuance beyond my death. This dissonance would thereby cleave as well the “self” as one who can inherit/bequeath only through mortality, i.e., in partaking of non-being. Could political theory's grounding lexicon of “sovereignty,” “self-interests,” “autonomy,” and “natural rights” withstand this splicing? I wonder if, against the intellectual hermeticism of “inheritance as exchange,” might be deployed the figure of the *orphan*, conventionally defined as the child with no inheritable relations: a being outside of belongingness and thus with no belongings. And yet, does not the orphan partake of a robust and complex legacy as the essential and recurring specter of Western financial, cultural, and biological inheritable relations under capitalism? Is not the incessant anxiety around the figure of the orphan—the compulsion to either fully restore its birthright or banish it completely—evidence of the unassimilable remainder that results from restricting inheritance to intentional relations of exchange? (Consider the dilemma of how the adopted child must be able to function as a continuance of the inheritable line but does so only by confounding the “natural ground” of biological inheritance.) The fate of the orphan structurally disowned in these discussions speaks less to actually dispossessed children than to the existence of a “legacy of the orphan” that links putatively disposable and “non-relational” subjects of state and economic indifference (the nursing home resident, the gig or migrant worker, the incarcerated, etc.).¹

But if intentionality cannot regulate inheritance, what means exist to alter descents that conscript subjects through genealogies of subjugation and trauma? As Zúñiga asks, “if it is not possible for individual agents to disavow lineages of inheritance, how can they short-circuit the transmission of trauma and the perpetuation of oppression? And how can they contribute to the revitalization and resurgence of traditions and forms of life that were nearly extinguished by colonization, slavery, and

genocide?” (Zúñiga 2023). As Zúñiga suggests, liberalist conceptions of the individual—those that Zapata demonstrates ignore inheritance as constitutive—can only formulate answers to such questions under the aegis of intentionality (e.g., self-determination, autonomy, agency, etc.). Another way to say this is that strategies to reroute inheritances that rely on precepts of witting agency will remain under the inheritable trusteeship of a liberalism born of “colonization, slavery, and genocide.” To live within this hegemony is to internalize the fear that without conspicuous agency there is only determination; without self-present intentionality only passive objectification. But why should those of us who suffer the indignations of this guardianship believe such a formulation or, what is more, trust it to hold a passkey to the good?

In my book *Stain Removal: Ethics and Race*, which anticipates this discussion of inheritance, I propose as one way of moving through this dualism the theorization of autonomy as a *clip*, a term with paradoxical definitions as that which both “joins” (like a paper clip) and “separates” (as a paper clipping).² Lines of inheritance thus “clip” subjectivity as a joint tenancy or tenancy-in-common—in which we simultaneously own and do not own the features, responsibilities, and objects by which we show up in our singularity as a point of transit within multiple lineages. Though more elaboration is not possible here, my suggestion is that, despite our attachment to liberal notions of agency, we are also animated by inheritances that employ expressions and euphemisms like “running in the family” that *already* gesture to this joint tenancy that defies the liberalist language of change expressed in terms of natural laws or witting autonomy and its attendant doctrines of freedom, resistance, and praxis. For example, what we now call “resistance” can be rethought as dissonances among the many inheritances that conscript us in their names, as this manifold does not meld the subject as a unity of those lineages. Thinkers like W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, and Gloria Anzaldúa have aptly chronicled the divided and fractured subject of contradictory lineages. We might take their critical insights to suggest that, insofar as subjectivity surfaces through dissonant lineages, the experience of “non-belonging” is intrinsic to inheritable “belongingness”: that is, we do not all belong in the same way to a shared inheritance. Thus “resistance” might mark the belongingness to other inheritances that position us otherwise *within* the inheritance we “resist.” One would not then resist the values and entitlements of an inheritance as a lone subject outside of it; rather, resistance would occur by virtue of the values and entitlements of one's belongingness within other lineages. I view such a reading as endorsing Zúñiga's suggestion that, for example, we “understand Indigenous resurgence as a project that seeks to resituate peoples within legacies of belonging whose existence has been under severe threat of extinction” (Zúñiga 2023).

Zúñiga's response also elicits for inheritance studies important questions regarding the shaping, self-representation, and legitimation of legacies. As Zúñiga writes, “The claim of ‘Western inheritance’ is thus problematic [...] when articulated within and outside of the academy to construe a common descent from a curated ancestral past to undergird a singular, unparalleled, and superior identity” (Zúñiga 2023). Let us start with the first half of this concern, that of “common descent” and “curation.” If inheritance indeed implies “common descent,” which it appears to, what would constitute this shared thread? By what means do inheritances advance some ways of being as more representative of the line than others, and how do these hierarchies realign depending on the discourse at hand? If inheritances are, as *WWPI* contends, “historically mobilizing conveyances,” the “common ancestry” they invoke would similarly be variable. That is, despite inheritance suggesting a one-way or unilateral movement of passage “down the line,” the ancestral “past” is no less mobile than its descent. The normalization of a “new” practice within an inheritance thus concurs with the revaluation and reinterpretation of ancestral figures, rituals, and features that integrate the “new” as “what we have

always done” or as the recovery of a lost art. In this sense, “curation,” per Zúñiga, would always be at work in both directions, renarrating and imagining the line in ways that retroactively fantasize the origin of its purported natural destiny. (This would be the *proleptic* feature of inheritance to which Zúñiga refers.)

It may be, then, that this first half of Zúñiga’s worry—that inheritances “construe a common descent from a curated ancestral past” is a general condition of inheritances, whether one speaks of pacifism, sexuality, or technology. This would suggest, moreover, that every inheritance, as *idiomatic*, lacks correspondence to any actual origin or continuous defining thread. Accordingly, inheritance would not radiate out from a starting point or center (e.g., a defining feature, action, or ontological difference); instead, as divided from the inside—that is, as what lacks intrinsic meaning but also as that from which meaning and purpose are drawn—a lineage could not authoritatively identify and rank its progeny. As such, *orphaning* and *not-belonging* would be structural and *internal* features of any line of transfer. This may be worth specifying to allow that relatively subordinate inheritances also foreground certain events, rituals, texts, and influences, as well as embodied features, traits, and dispositions, the citations and recastings of which permit the continuation of these communities, nations, and ethnicities.

The second aspect of Zúñiga’s concern is the use of inheritance “to undergird a singular, unparalleled, and superior identity.” To rehearse, inheritances are not strategic constructions by societies or peoples *for* some purpose; rather, purposes are interpreted through inheritances. As inheritances have no intrinsic telos or objective, multiple and conflicting purposes can be interpreted from the same inheritance (e.g., the language of liberalism justifying colonialist and anti-colonialist objectives or the moral polysemy of the duties of sanctuary and conversion in Christianity). As discussed above, it is difficult to anticipate the applications that inheritance studies will make available for any specific intervention. But as these examples suggest, like the relation between words and meaning, the relation between inheritance and entitlements—that is, between belongingness and the belongings that it purportedly accords (goods, status, qualities, etc.)—does not derive from any intrinsic connection. In this respect, *no* inheritance, including legacies of the West, could viably uphold an inherently *righteous title* or claim to “superiority,” not because its “real” entitlement is otherwise but because structurally, the relationship between inheritances and what they confer is fundamentally arbitrary and historical.

We might still undertake this second component of Zúñiga’s worry as a question about the temporality and mortality of inheritances themselves. Even if legacies have no discernable point of origin, would this mean they also never end? Undoubtedly, one might wish several transmissible ways of being to die out, like poverty, sexism, and ecological devastation. But is this a desire for extinction or for a rerouting? For instance, might we instead conceive the legacy of ecological devastation as an unduly prominent feature within the broader inheritance of the ecological that must be simultaneously owned and disowned for it to abate? By this, I am thinking of Katz’s allusion that for the United States to move beyond or disown its legacy of slavery, it must first actively and comprehensively “own” it as part of its inheritance. The condition of slavery no longer defining this national legacy would then be that it remain a transmissible part of it, another instance of a split propriety or joint tenancy.

Katz recites rhetoric by which such disinheritance is attempted, e.g., a person asserting they or their family were not slaveowners. Such subjects, Katz counters, speak “as if they do not benefit from *not being* born into a formerly enslaved family” (Katz 2023). Katz’s argument helpfully distinguishes two ongoing logics of entitlement and responsibility. One maintains the market morality of

commensurability between action and consequence: I am responsible only for my own actions, the praise and punishment for which falls to me alone. This responsibility is governed by principles of credit and debt; one “pays” only for one's own crime, which incurs no more debt than the exact amount of its expiation. That the punishment fits the crime is the ideal of this zero-sum accounting. The logic of inheritance, in contrast, signifies what I have elsewhere called a “history of responsibility,” wherein responsibility accrues for actions that belong to the subject yet are not, in the language of market morality, “committed” by them.³ Fanon writes: “I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors” (Fanon 1967: 112). Fanon does not act outside inheritable relations but always *as* a black male, *as* a Martinican, etc., in that actions only exist within the interpretable history of what “black men” and “Martinicans” *do*. Such histories of responsibility, it must be stressed, do not narrow or circumscribe possible action but are the productive context for the possibility of any action by any group or subject.

In the same way that, as Fanon describes, actions extend beyond the subject along ancestral lines, so do the advantages and disadvantages accorded those ancestries, which, rather than zero out, continue indefinitely across generations. For non-enslaved ancestries, those “benefits,” as Katz suggests, redound to subjects irrespective of their actions, not only because such acts are never purely their “own,” as Fanon remarks, but also because inheritable opportunities are not acquired based on what the subject does. Opportunities, rather, afford the capacity to *act as* or *in the name of*, outside of which no act would be legible.

Yet Katz also contends that such inheritable consequences can be traceable to an original deed of a prior ancestor. To make this case, Katz usefully turns to readings of Judaic literature to orient us to pre-modern and theological discourses in which inheritance across death receives more overt attention as a genuine puzzle about how sin reverberates through ancestral lines. It proved a troubling quandary for these exegetes precisely because sinful transgression does not enact the logic of punishment but of the *curse*, that is, an open-ended ethical inheritance. Katz recounts the biblical story of Cain's murder of Abel to propose how we might understand inheritable blessings and curses as moral credits and debits to make them comprehensible within the market logic of punishment. Inheritable blessings and curses, she and others hypothesize, are commensurate consequences of the moral deed of an ancestor; the degree of benefits and disadvantages conferred to successors and the duration of that generational repetition thus correspond to the beneficence or heinousness of the precipitating deed: “It is not that a child should suffer harm because a parent has committed a sin. Rather, it is that some deeds are so bad, so horrific, that their effects will reverberate through the generations to come. We will feel those ill effects just as we reap the benefits from the past and hope to pass those benefits to the generations who are not yet born” (Katz 2023)

But we might wonder whether the impoverished and subjugated experience the “trauma” or “ill effects” of their inheritances because a distant elder committed a grievous crime. (This aside from the worry articulated by Zúñiga that such an exegesis would justify inherited wealth, opportunities, and entitlements—those *blessings*—as a “reaping of benefits” that colonizers already view as prosperity devolving from the “good works” of their curated progenitors.) Such a resolution risks missing what is unique to relations of inheritance by interpreting them as exchange relations predicated on, in Zapata's words, the “deliberate and calculated behavior of self-interested rational agents looking out for their personal legacies and the well-being of their heirs and successors,” language that closely mirrors Katz's.

More broadly, inheritance studies would encourage us to investigate first how a phenomenon must itself be configured to be inheritable: what kind of a thing would trauma need to be for it to cross death? Is trauma like “my grandmother's ring” that escapes my exclusive ownership of it by remaining “my grandmother's,” a name the object retains on the premise of my own death? Or is trauma more like knowledge, the passing of which, as Katz points out, implies a slightly different inheritable object that demands no dispossession for it to iterate? Whichever configuration trauma reflects, its nature as inheritable must be other than its standard definition as the aftereffects of an original irruptive event. Such an ontology is particularly susceptible to reassessment through inheritance insofar as this definition presupposes a singularity of experience: unlike existential angst or psychoanalytic misrecognition, trauma happens to *me*, not as a general condition for consciousness but as a disruption to it. But then, unlike the inheritable ring or ancestral knowledge, trauma would be neither divisible—mine and not mine—across subjects and groups nor genealogically transmissible. To rhetorically invoke trauma as inheritable—as is now frequently done—thus disaggregates the singularity of trauma both at the site of its effects as well as in its premise of issuing from a unique and singular origin.

We might then revise Katz's take on Cain and Levinas' reading of David in light of the configuring of inheritance in the story of Ham and Noah that refuses the reinstallation of moral exchange relations, those that would reassure us that our bequeathed situations and affordances are initiated by a traumatic origin, and thus ultimately governed by moral equivalence and rational benefit-passing. The tale records that Noah passes out drunk in his tent and that one of his sons, Ham, having entered and seen his father naked, tells his two brothers outside. Here, then, is the key passage: “When Noah awoke from his wine, he knew what his youngest son had done to him. So he said Cursed be Canaan, A servant of servants he shall be to his brothers” (*Genesis* 9:24-25). Countless interpreters like Philo and St. Augustine have ventured to identify the vile yet nameless crime that Ham had “done” to warrant so severe a curse upon his son Canaan and thus metonymically upon his ancestry. What a reading through inheritance discloses, however, is that the crime as nameless is essential, not accidental, to the story's function in escaping the logic of moral commensurability. That Canaanites deserved their subjugated inheritance was never at issue; the story thus serves to retroactively posit not crime but *criminality* as an inheritable behavioral disposition.⁴ Analogously, as the African American scholar Kelly Miller asserted over a century ago, no identifiable crimes of black people initiate their inheritance of a criminal disposition; the charge is rather that blackness signifies one as “addicted to crime of an execrable and nameless character” (Miller 1968: 96). The “nameless” crime is not a placeholder for an actual deed but for crime *per se*, i.e., unmitigated criminality. Thus, when subjugated inheritors are harmed, denied care or services, or disproportionately impoverished, no charge of a primordial deed is needed. Within the legacy of ethics as moral equivalence, one need not name the exact transgression warranting this outcome but merely believe that as inheritors of criminal character those subjects must have done something at some point to deserve it, the unnameability affirming rather than countering that logic of proportional punishment.

I thus appreciate Katz's concern that we “address the symptoms—a police shooting here, discrimination in a job there, a church massacre nearby, but we do not address the originating trauma, wound, or injustice that is passed from generation to generation” (Katz 2023), yet the question I imagine inheritance studies to pose in response is, what origin? What precipitating transgression? For instance, is African chattel slavery an origin? Or is it a symptom of imperialism, greed, power, racism, moral zealotry, etc.? Are these latter themselves origins or symptoms? What, again, is unique to our language of inheritance is that its explanatory value depends precisely on a suspension of this division of causal force and determined effect. African chattel slavery is distinct *as an instance of* a global,

historical legacy of slavery as well as several other legacies. Its ability to be invoked to explain contemporary knowledge and social relations is in no way diminished by being a point of relay in these movements. Yet to identify a current dynamic (e.g., the racial-carceral system) as a legacy of slavery need not signal slavery as the singular or primary cause of that dynamic. If I read Katz correctly, the objection is to treating certain incidents as isolated, disconnected events—an atomism that an expanded theory of inheritance would refute. But it would also refute, as argued earlier, inheritable transfer as what disseminates from causal origins (e.g., Levinasian “seeds”) as a mechanical mode of explanation and by which entitlements are attributable to the praise- or blameworthy actions of moral agents or groups that would fabricate an original lost “cause” that prioritizes the convention of inheritance as a gift or burden that subjects carry as what is other to themselves—as “belongings” rather than belongingness. Inheritance studies would instead explore forms of reasoning in which responsibility is a historicity relayed in our ways of being, seeking therefore not “roots” but “routes,” wherein references to prior events as ancestral sources indicate not attributions of spontaneous or fixed origins but provisional joints within the open-ended and curated continuance of inheritances.

Let us reflect, finally, on the future of Inheritance Studies as a potential “lost cause” in a different but related sense that Zapata introduces: “I predict reluctance from many professional academic philosophers to Miller’s invitation to theorize inheritance [...] as a symptom of a methodological shortcoming of professional philosophy in the Anglo-American world, favoring normative claims over creative textual exegesis” (Zapata 2023). We might count these “symptoms” as, again, the provisional joints of western academic legacies, for what are such legacies if not “well-worn paths of existing research” (Zapata 2023) that are “wary” of redrafting their entitlements? To theorize inheritance rather than its objects would alter academic inheritance itself, not merely in methodology or disciplinary stability but in its “way of telling the story” other than as “patterns of historical progress, rational development, and modernism” (Zúñiga 2023). But what must not be lost is that this belongingness also inherits us, even as a not-belonging or orphaning that it can never disown or subsume: once more, we do not all belong in the same way to a shared inheritance.

We conduct this discussion in the forum of a philosophical journal; we hold philosophical and academic posts; we cite each other as well as past and present interlocutors in the manner of philosophical address. This legacy speaks us as transit points of its ongoing continuance and thus entitles us and our fellow successors to reclaim the study of inheritance not against its belongingness but *in its name*. To reframe the terrain, object, and expanse of inheritance studies into a new interdisciplinary domain demands, however, that this study simultaneously speak us in the name of multiple different lineages: the non-western, “creative exegesis,” estrangement, poetics, dis-ease, the orphaned, risk-taking, and other lineages that privilege the “lost cause” of the question over the known quantity of the answer.

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- ¹ One element to which this analytic political tradition alludes that my essay fails to consider explicitly is the possibility of “random” endowments outside transferable descents. Might there be endowments that are not entitlements? Though I hesitate to foreclose the prospect, the likelihood seems dim once we reject the predication of traits on presence, i.e., that the development of a trait requires that it be modeled, encoded, taught, etc. Inheritable belongingness does not demand this overt encounter; rapid speaking can distinguish a subject without that subject having been birthed, raised, or taught by rapid speakers. Such belongingness requires only that this trait *be* a feature that can potentially be named not as a core identity but as a disposition (“rapid speaking”) that one represents as a historical instantiation.
- ² See Miller (2017). An alternative term, “cleave,” has similarly productive and paradoxical definitions of severing and holding tightly together.

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- ³ With inheritance, no commission of an original deed inaugurates the line, though to the extent that this becomes part of the narrative myth of an inheritance—e.g., the ritualistic retellings of the heroic or criminal doings of founding figures—such original deeds *can* be said to be reproduced in each instantiation of the line. Here the “original” deed becomes again transferable and internally divided, as both mine and the legacy’s: I fight to maintain this way of life in the same way that our ancestors fought to establish it—it is the same fight, the deeds recursively iterated, in a manner irreducible to the neat correspondence of individual action and equivalent responsibility. On the notion of the “history of responsibility,” see Miller (2017 esp. chapter 1).
- ⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the Hamitic myth and inheritance, see Miller (2017 Chpts 3 and 4).

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