In the case of these immigrants, prosthetic memories of Anglo-Saxon pasts work to construct typical white Americans. As the next chapters reveal, in its more radical form, prosthetic memory generates difference, teaches people about otherness, and makes possible a politics that challenges dominant, and often oppressive, ideologies.

In April 1997, Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History reopened in its new, state-of-the-art building. Celebrated by the press as the largest of its kind, this museum reflects four years of work by designers, architects, historians, and local artists and has attracted significant national attention. At the heart of the museum, and the core of the permanent exhibit, is a slave ship (see figure 4). Following a walkway suspended over the hull of the ship, visitors are confronted with forty life-size figures of slaves in its hold. Notably, these slaves are children. The caption reads:

When they were sold into slavery, many of our African ancestors were teenagers or young adults. To pay homage to the memory of these individuals, students from Detroit volunteered to be cast as figures for the exhibit. The contribution of these young people is one of the many ways in which we, as a community, are remembering those of our ancestors who were enslaved, remembering the crimes that enslaved them, and remembering their countless acts of resistance.

As this caption suggests, the museum has granted the African American child a privileged position in remembering and reciting the story of slavery and racial oppression. By participating in this project, Detroit schoolchildren have quite literally lent their bodies to memorialize an event through which they did not live. The museum's radical—and controversial—decision to use the bodies of healthy Detroit schoolchildren to represent slaves raises some of the
Central issues this chapter addresses. Casting the youth of Detroit dramatically suggests that children might play a particularly important role in remembering slavery. It also suggests that people might be able, through an act of prosthesis, to take on memories of events through which they never lived.

The opening of this particular kind of African American history museum, one that foregrounds slavery, is in some ways the culmination of a movement to remember publicly one of the most deplorable episodes in American history. As a dark and ugly period in the nation’s past, slavery was, for more than a century, a chapter to forget. In fact, the institution of slavery in the United States provoked amnesia not just in whites, for whom slavery was a source of guilt, but in blacks as well, many of whom chose to look to Africa for a heritage of which they could be proud. But in the last several decades, both literary and mass cultural texts, like the Detroit museum, have begun the challenging project of remembering the experience of slavery.

This chapter explores the issue of remembering slavery and considers the possibilities that prothetic memories open up for both blacks and whites in remembering and understanding racial oppression. The chapter begins with William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* as a case in which collective memories of traumatic events are generated. Faulkner’s novel shows that distance—both temporal and geographic—from the event remembered is often necessary to transmit memory. More important, *Absalom, Absalom!* raises the possibility that there might be powerful nonfamilial modes for generating and passing on memory. The chapter then analyzes how the historical and economic conditions of slavery—in particular, the disregard for and delegitimization of the slave family—disrupted traditional means of passing on memory and genealogy. The tearing apart of families meant that alternative modes of memory transmission would be required to produce genealogies and communities. Like the Detroit museum, many recent works on slavery are organized around or narrated by a child. Furthermore, the genealogies that these children produced are not based on “biological” inheritance or “organic memory” but are constructed through a broad notion of kinship and community. Through an examination of Toni Morrison’s novels *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* and Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust*, this chapter investigates the interpretative power of these genealogical endeavors and especially the way that memories of one’s “ancestors,” understood broadly, might mark or alter one’s subjectivity. Likewise, the chapter argues that as technologies of memory, these texts might also mark, alter, or scar the bodies of their readers.

When the mass media try to remember slavery and the history of racial oppression, as has been increasingly the case over the last several decades, such memories can reach wider audiences and affect those who come in contact with them. The final part of the chapter examines how prothetic memories

*MEMORY’S HOMOEOTIC LOGICS: DISLOCATION AND DISSIMINATION*

Family memory, the memory handed down from parent to child, has long been privileged as a reliable source of information about the past. Indeed, the family is one of the three key frameworks that Halbwachs identifies in the dissemination of collective memory. In the case of slavery, however, the radical rupture of families and communities meant that group memories had to be generated and disseminated by alternative mechanisms. William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), a modernist novel about the South and slavery, illustrates a model of memory transmission that does not rely exclusively on familial or community networks. In the novel, Quentin Compson, a southerner, and his roommate, Shreve McCannon, from the north, create a memory of Quentin’s past out of the “rag-tag and bob-ends” of the past. The narrative they elaborate turns out to be as much about Shreve’s past and America’s slave past as it is about Quentin’s. Furthermore, the very act of constructing changes who the characters are in the present. Since the act of generating the narrative is depicted as an erotic experience, the novel suggests that memory generation is always in excess of, or at least inadequately represented by, the heterosexual, reproductive, “organic” logic of the nuclear family.

Quentin and Shreve’s narrative is quite literally constructed before the reader in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the boys’ Harvard dormitory room. The place of memory, then, is not Quentin’s home, not the site of ancestral knowledge, but the university, the site of fraternal or intragenerational knowledge. A letter that Quentin has received from his father sets in motion their narrative process: “On the table before Quentin, lying on the open text book beneath the lamp, the white oblong of envelope, the familiar blurred mechanical [handwritten text].” The letter from his father, which has moved from South to North crossing a great spatial expanse, only underscores Quentin’s remove—both metaphysical and
geographically—from his family in the South. The letter itself, which seems oddly out of place in Cambridge, emphasizes the disjuncture between the two sites: it pulls with it the "dead dusty summer where he had prepared for Harvard so that his father's hand could lie on a strange lamp-lit table in Cambridge" (173). His father's hand, read both as his distinctive handwriting and more eerily as an actual appendage, appears out of place in this dorm room. This juxtaposition stages the uneasy relationship between two models of memory transmission: the letter from Quentin's father represents a model of transgenerational memory of memory handed down from parent to child, while the dorm room represents a site of intragenerational memory, memory constructed or reconstructed by peers. But the incongruity of the letter and the dorm room raises questions about the very possibility of a smooth, transgenerational transmission of memory. The letter, itself a dismembered piece of story, indicates that even transgenerational memory transmission is characterized by disjunction. Dislocation is an obstacle to both memory and its condition of possibility. Absalom, Absalom! suggests that Quentin must leave the South and his family—the social unit historically entrusted with transmitting memory—in order to produce this narrative.

This scene of collaborative narrative generation is also a scene of erotic possibility. Faulkner's narration moves back and forth between an account of the story that Quentin and Shreve are weaving together and a description of their bodies in the dorm room. The erotics of the novel lie outside what Judith Butler has referred to as the "heterosexual matrix," outside the parameters of desire prescribed by Freud's "family romance." Describing Quentin and Shreve, Faulkner writes:

There was something curious in the way they looked at one another, curious and quiet and profoundly intent, not at all as two young men might look at each other but almost as a youth and a very young girl might out of virginity itself—a sort of hushed and naked searching, each look burdened with youth's immemorial obsession not with time's dragging weight which the old live but with its fluidity: the bright heels of all the lost moments of fifteen and sixteen. (299)

Quentin and Shreve pick up on, and are then infused by, the homoerotic attraction between Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon, the two characters on whom Quentin and Shreve spend most of their narrative. Like Quentin and Shreve, Sutpen and Bon also met in college. In the act of narration, it is as if Shreve and Quentin inhabit the characters whose story they tell. Through a collaborative "remembering" they produce Sutpen and Bon, drawing them into their room: "While both their breathing vaporized faintly in the cold room where
“NATAL ALIENATION” AND THE CHILD GENEALOGIST

Given the profound effect of slavery on African American families, it seems noteworthy that the majority of texts about slavery produced in the last decades of the twentieth century are either narrated by or organized around a child. Although child heroes in fiction are not particularly new, the historical specificity of the black child demands particular attention. In these slavery texts, children tend to occupy positions outside the normative nuclear family. We might argue that as slavery tore families apart, it produced a kind of orphaning whose effects lasted well beyond Emancipation.

Many historians have explored the way that slavery as an institution forced a radical, violent separation between slaves and their past. Stanley Elkins argued that for a slave,

much of his past had been annihilated; nearly every prior connection had been severed. Not that he had really “forgotten” all these things—his family and kinship arrangements, his language, the tribal religion, the taboos, the name he had once borne, and so on—but none of it any longer carried much meaning.9

In his provocative comparative study of slavery around the globe, Orlando Patterson takes up Elkin’s thesis, delineating the genealogical ramifications of slavery. Patterson contends that slavery produces “natal alienation,” which he describes as “alienation from all ‘rights’ or claims of birth,” such that a slave “ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order.”10 The term natal alienation, says Patterson, points to “the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations.”11 Because slaves held the status of chattel—that is, they could be sold away from their families at any moment—they lost access to their cultural ancestors as well as to their nuclear families. As Patterson observes, “Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors: on his descendants.”12 Because in Patterson’s vocabulary, a slave was “socially dead,” having “no socially recognized existence outside of his master,”13 his relationships were never recognized as legitimate. This was most tragically the case for the parent-child bond, which “had no social support.”14 Parents had “no custodial claims or power over their children,” and children “inherited no claims or obligations to their parents.”15 To articulate this condition in its most extreme form, then, would be to say that every slave child was juridically born an orphan. A slave, Patterson wrote, “was truly a genealogical isolate.”16

Patterson’s argument is historically problematic. As many historians have demonstrated, African slaves in America coped with their plight by developing rich cultural practices and strong community ties.17 Through specific musical genres, the elaboration of spiritual and religious practices, and the telling of stories, African slaves in the United States articulated a powerful shared consciousness. Lawrence Levine, for example, points out that slave songs built communal solidarity and served as a medium through which slaves could express the injustice of their situation and, in subtle ways, “comment on the whites around them.”18

To suggest that slaves were “socially dead” in a literal sense is to ignore the richly textured culture that slaves produced. Yet the idea of “natal alienation” does have a powerful resonance. The brutality of slavery was in part its assault on normal social life. In fact, the subversive creativity of slave culture was itself a response to these conditions. The experience of losing family connections, as was commonly the case when fathers, mothers, and children were sold away from one another, helped catalyze new, nontraditional forms of cultural production along with alternative community and kinship ties. As the texts I analyze reveal, it was precisely their sense of “natal alienation” that led slaves and their descendants to create forms of kinships based on shared experiences and memories rather than on biological or familial connection. This “orphaning” then, might well have been the motivation for the urgent genealogical endeavors undertaken by the children in the slavery texts this chapter explores.

More than a century before Patterson developed this concept, the breakup of slave families was the subject of much public concern. In fact, much of the rhetoric of nineteenth-century abolitionism dwelled on the horror of severing the parent-child bond. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), often touted as the American novel about slavery, aims its critique at slavery’s power to separate children from their mothers.19 In the novel’s opening scene, Mr. Shelby, a plantation owner, meets with Mr. Haley, a prospective buyer, to discuss selling his slave Tom. Mr. Haley wavers until little Harry, the slave son of Eliza and George, comes in to dance for the men. Mr. Haley is so taken by Harry that he says, “Fling in that chap, and I’ll settle the business.”20 Although Mr. Shelby prides himself on his morality—“I’m a humane man, and I hate to take the boy from his mother” (46)—economic conditions prevail, and he decides to go ahead with the deal. Having overheard enough of their discussion to understand her son to be in grave danger, Eliza decides to run away to Canada; in other words, the impending sale of her son catalyzes the narrative action of the novel. As Eliza later explains to Mrs. Bird, the senator’s wife who takes her in, “I never spent a night without him and he was all I had. He was my comfort and pride, day and night; and, ma’am, they
The disenfranchisement caused by natal alienation inevitably complicated the transmission of cultural memory, and this sort of disjunction did not cease with Emancipation. Even after the Civil War, the vast African American migrations to the industrial centers of the North separated persons from family and community. In other words, African American family and community life was characterized by rupture in both the antebellum and the postbellum periods. In this historical context, the fact that many recent texts about slavery and racial oppression—in particular, Beloved (Toni Morrison), Song of Solomon (Toni Morrison), Daughters of the Dust (Julie Dash), Roots (Alex Haley), and Rosewood (John Singleton)—are narrated or organized around a child assumes greater significance. Just as the child is the site of trauma in abolitionist discourse, the child ultimately must be the agent of recovery, creatively producing his or her own genealogy or memory narrative. It takes an inquisitive child, these texts suggest, a member of a generation that has been cut off from the past and has no living relation to either slavery or Africa, to initiate the difficult process of remembering. As in Abolition, Abolition: it is the young people who must unearth the past and produce genealogies that they might, paradoxically, pass on to their kin.

Children might be particularly suited to the task of genealogy for other reasons as well. Sigmund Freud argued that childhood desire, unlike the socialized desire of the normative heterosexual adult, is "polymorphously perverse." Writing on infantile sexuality,23 Freud notes that infantile desire is not anchored to a specific object but that children "can be led into all possible kinds of sexual irregularities. This shows that an aptitude for them is innately present in their disposition."24 The sexual organization of the child, in other words, is far from fixed.24 Freud's image of the polymorphously perverse baby underscores the creative possibilities of this early form of desire. In particular, Freud discovered that the sexual investigations of these early years of childhood coincide with the child's first moment of epistemological inquiry, what Freud calls "the instinct for knowledge or research."25 These investigations are carried out in solitude, apart from the family, "and imply a high degree of alienation of the child from people in his environment who formerly enjoyed his complete confidence."26 Not only is this early form of...
sire in constructing genealogy. For Morrison, memories of a cultural past are not familiar, not inherited through the family; on the contrary, they always are alienated. In fact, the epigraph to *Song of Solomon* centers on the inevitable alienation of the past in slavery, which is what makes the issue of generational transmission so problematic: “The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names.” In this passage, fathers and children are separated by a rupture, a line break. There is neither enjambment, pushing the first line into the next, nor a causal connector. The line does not, for example, read “the fathers may soar so that the children may know their names.” That the lines are connected only by and emphasizes the contingency of any such transmission. Furthermore, the second line reads “the children” rather than “their children.” These children might not be their children, at least in the traditional, biological, hereditary sense. While the epigraph points to the child as genealogist, it resists the idea that those genealogies will be biologically determined. At best, the epigraph suggests, the children might construct kinships, might create, as Pilate in *Song of Solomon* and Denver in *Beloved* do, livable landscapes and kinships for the present.

*Song of Solomon* is ostensibly the story of Milkman Dead, an African American child who, though long sheltered from his cultural past by his conservative father, ultimately undertakes a journey in search of his “inheritance.” The fact that he is a member of the “Dead” family is not without rhetorical significance, for the name Dead speaks to Milkman’s alienation from the past. We could even say that metaphorically, at the novel’s start, he is socially dead in Patterson’s terms, as he lacks all “claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors.” Milkman’s father, Macon, an upwardly mobile northern businessman, actively attempts to keep Milkman from investigating his cultural heritage. Toward this end, Macon tries to protect his son from his estranged sister Pilate. Milkman’s Aunt Pilate lives outside society both literally and symbolically, “in a narrow single-story house whose basement seemed to be rising from rather than settling into the ground,” with “no electricity because she would not pay for the service. Nor for gas” (27). She is considered a freak of sorts and is rumored to be “ugly, dirty, poor, and drunk” (37). Not only does she refuse to conform to the bourgeois values to which Macon aspires, but she also represents a threat to Macon’s worldview, which is tied to the logic of capitalism. Macon warns Milkman to stay away from her: “Pilate can’t teach you a thing you can use in this world.... Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things” (55).

Despite his father’s warnings, or perhaps because of them, Milkman is curious about Pilate and her world. At school, Milkman meets Guitar, “the boy
who not only could liberate him, but could take him to the woman who had as much to do with his future as she had his past” (36). Because Guitar claims to have been to Pilate’s house before and because Milkman is, after all, her nephew, the two boys decide to investigate “the woman [that Milkman’s] father had forbidden him to go near” (36). As they near her house they find Pilate, clad in a long black dress, sitting outside on the steps. From her ear dangles a brass box. Intrigued by her appearance, Milkman knew that “not the wisdom of his father nor the caution of the world—could keep him from her” (36). Their visit culminates with Pilate singing:

O Sugarman don’t leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Sugarman don’t leave me here
Buckra’s arms to yoke me . . .

Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home. (49)

From this moment forward, Pilate represents a countertradition; it is she who opens the door to the journey Milkman decides to undertake.

Pilate is compelling to Milkman for reasons other than simple “defiance” (49) of his father’s wishes. Pilate is quite literally “naturally alienated.” As Pilate tells him, her mother died before she was born: “She died and the next minute I was born. But she was dead by the time I drew air” (141). As a result, Pilate has been severed from her biological ancestry and from the traditional mechanisms for the generation of knowledge and memory. Pilate’s autonomy, her lack of biological ties to her birth, is foregrounded by the fact that she lacks a navel. As if to literarize the absence of a biological tie to her mother, shortly after Pilate’s birth “the stump shriveled, fell off, and left no trace of having ever existed” (28). As we are told early on in this narrative:

After their mother died she had come struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water. As a result, for all the years he [Macon] knew her, her stomach was as smooth and sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel. It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels; had never lain, floated, or grown in some warm and liquid place connected by a tissue thin tube to a reliable source of human nourishment. (27–28)

...
her throat so that she would not have to suffer the life of a slave and who was taken away from her too soon. With her symbolic birth into the present, Beloved "walk[s] out of the water" a "fully dressed woman," with "new skin, lineless and smooth." From the outset, Sethe fascinates her; Beloved "could not take her eyes off Sethe. Stooping to shake the damper, or snapping sticks for kindling, Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes" (71). For Sethe's attention, Beloved is insatiable: she rise early in the dark to be there, waiting, in the kitchen when Sethe came down to make fast bread before she left for work... She was in the window at two when Sethe returned, or the doorway; then the porch, its steps, the path, the road, till finally, surrendering to the habit, Beloved began inching down Bluestone Road further and further each day to meet Sethe and walk her back to 124. (71)

Sethe begins to sense that Beloved's intense desire is erotic: Sethe "was sliding into sleep when she felt Beloved touch her. A touch no heavier than a feather but loaded, nevertheless, with desire. Sethe stirred and looked around. First at Beloved's soft new hand on her shoulder, then into her eyes. The longing she saw there was bottomless" (72).

But for Beloved, as for the child Freud describes, this moment of sexual desire coincides with other epistemological concerns, in this case, her desire to have the past narrativized. Instead of simply pursuing an erotic encounter with Sethe, Beloved begins a tireless investigation into Sethe's past and, by extension, her own. This investigation begins when Beloved asks Sethe, "Where your diamonds?" (72). At first Sethe is confused, but as Beloved presses on with "Tell me your diamonds" (72), Sethe begins to recount the story of the "diamond" earrings that Mrs. Garner had given her. This exchange is fantastical for several reasons, not the least of which is that Beloved has memories of events that occurred before she was born. It is as if she has become a mobile archive, a storehouse for Sethe's unmanageable memories. But even though she holds the kernel of each memory, she needs Sethe to put it into narrative for her. As Sethe comes to realize, it was "a way to feed her... Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling" (72).

It is precisely Beloved's dislocation—that she has been dead—that enables her to catalyze Sethe's memories, memories that Sethe finds intensely painful. Previously for Sethe, "every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost" (72). The memories that Beloved brings to the surface are memories that she had refused to share with Denver or Paul D., one of the slave men from "Sweet Home" who came to find her in Ohio. These memo-
believes were ones that she and her mother-in-law Baby Suggs agreed were "unspeakable." In other words, like Quentin’s father’s “hand” in the Harvard dorm room, Beloved provides what de Certeau called the “occasion” for memory. 45 Sethe discovers that she actually derives pleasure from storytelling: “As she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected pleasure” (73). Indeed, if as we have seen in Absalom, Absalom! rupture and distance are the conditions of possibility for memory, then Beloved’s dislocation renders narratable horrors like her own: that a mother might choose to murder her child in order to protect her from the even worse horrors of slave life.

This scene functions as a microcosm for Beloved’s role in the text as a whole. Beloved’s privileged position as the possessor of memory, despite her dislocation from the family, ultimately enables the abominations of slavery to be aired. But these are not the only memories she has of events through which she did not live. Toward the end of the novel, Beloved herself explains:

I am Beloved and she is mine. . . . All of it is now . . . it is always now . . . there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too. . . . I am always crouching . . . the man on my face is dead . . . I do not eat . . . the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink . . . those able to die are in a pile . . . the little hill of dead people . . . a hot thing . . . the men without skin push them through with poles . . . they fall into the sea which is the color of the bread. (259–60)

Her recollection of the white men, men without skin, and the cruelties they inflicted on African slaves indicates that she possesses memories of the Middle Passage, which cannot be her memory in any strict sense. Nonetheless, these memories are visceral, palpable, and sensuous and have no less power than the memories of events through which she did live.

Not only do these cases challenge the idea of memory as biological, familial inheritance, but the plot of Morrison’s novel actually contains an implicit critique of the nuclear family. Once Sethe realizes who Beloved is, that “she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will” (246), Sethe is willing to shut out the rest of the world. But the private world of the family—of just Sethe, Denver, and Beloved—is more nightmare than utopia. Beloved becomes greedier and hungrier, and Sethe cannot satiate her desires; as Beloved grows larger and larger, Sethe loses weight and strength. Finally, Denver decides to take action, to leave the family, and to get help. When she tries to find work, she tells her story, which eventually finds its way to the other African American women in town. Once the neighborhood women know that Sethe’s dead daughter, the one “whose flesh is on,” had come back to fix her” (313), they decide that “a rescue was in order” (314). The women gather for the exorcism and begin singing when they reach Sethe’s house. Sethe is ultimately freed from Beloved’s strangling grasp not by her nuclear family but by the collective power of a large community of African American women. In another context, Morrison spoke about the importance of neighborhood to African American life:

And there was this life-giving, very very strong sustenance that people got from the neighborhood. One lives, really, not so much in your house as you do outside of it, within the “compound,” within the village, or whatever it is. And legal responsibilities, all the responsibilities that agencies now have were the responsibility of the neighborhood. So that people were taken care of, or locked up, or whatever. . . . They also meddled in your lives a lot. They felt that you belonged to them. And every woman on the street could raise everybody’s child, and tell you exactly what to do and you felt that connection with those people and they felt it with you. 46

This privileging of community as kinship deemphasizes the importance of biology and the nuclear family.

Like Beloved and Song of Solomon, Julie Dash’s film Daughters of the Dust (1991) dramatically illustrates the case of a child coming to own and inhabit memories of events through which she did not live. Dash’s film tells the story of the Peazzants, an extended African American family living on the Carolina sea islands, on the eve of their migration north. The impending migration, which is eagerly anticipated by most of the family, engenders anxiety in the patriarch, Nana Peazzant. The migration raises questions for her about how memory—cultural and collective memory, memory of Africa, the Middle Passage, and slavery—will be passed on. The issue of memory is immediately foregrounded when we learn that the film’s story is being remembered—or “recounted,” as the script indicates—by an Unborn Child. She is not a part of their lived experience in the traditional sense, and yet her disjunctive position gives her the ability to recollect. Privileging her with narrative agency, this film is centered on the potential of the child. The Unborn Child explains: “My story begins on the eve of my family’s migration north. My story begins before I was born. My great great grandmother, Nana Peazzant, saw her family coming apart. Her flowers to bloom in a distant frontier.” 47 Interestingly, she calls these events she did not actually live through “My story.” The Peazzants endow her with enormous potential, for as Daddy Mac says to the family, “I’m especially proud today to bless the coming child of our Eli and Eula Peazzant. Our first child that’s going to be born up North. Our child of
the future." (142). The Unborn Child is thus given both hope for the future and the role of recollecting her ancestral past.

Particularly worthy of note in *Daughters of the Dust* is the Unborn Child's utopian potential in Walter Benjamin's sense: throughout the film she is aligned with technological possibility. It is she who looks through a stereoscopic viewer at pictures of the northern cities. Even more significant is her relationship to photography. We learn in the opening scene of the film that Viola, one of the women in the Peazant family, has hired a photographer to document the family's migration north. When looking through the viewerfinder of his camera at the Peazzants, the photographer sees the Unborn Child in the group with the others (see figures 5 and 6). She is visible, it seems, not to the naked eye but only to the camera lens. For Benjamin, photography, with its capacity to "reveal entirely new structural formations of the subject," functions as an "optical unconscious," and the "optical unconscious" makes her visible. The camera in Benjamin's account and in the case of *Daughters of the Dust* allows one to see things that would otherwise remain invisible. That the Unborn Child is visible as part of the Peazzant family only through the camera lens implies that as a mechanism of memory, the camera does more than merely record. These technologies actually give birth to the child—and to the process of remembering.

The film also goes a long way toward separating memory from lived experience or from strict biological inheritance. In *Daughters of the Dust*, Nana Peazzant understands the way in which the historical experience of slavery itself becomes a kind of bond and kinship, affecting one's body and subjectivity: "We will always live this double life, you know, because we're from the sea. We came here in chains, and we must survive. There's salt water in our blood." (151). As in *Beloved*, the "memory" of the Middle Passage, like the memory of slavery itself, can mark a body and feel real even for a person who did not live through the actual event. In fact, to convey that slavery is a heritance that can be inherited, the film depicts the Unborn Child's hands—hands that were never slave hands—as blue from the indigo dye of the plantation days. A flashback to slave life reveals women working with large vats of indigo blue dye, making the slaves' blue-stained hands a physical mark of their labor. The Unborn Child's blue finger does not testify to a biological account of heredity but demonstrates how the past, even a past that she did not live through, can mark her body. Her blue hand indicates that how a body is marked by birth has fewer ramifications for one's personhood than how it is marked by one's cultural inheritance, by one's cultural memory. The blue hand dramatizes the way that memories of one's ancestors—prosthetic memories—might actually scar one's body.

Similarly, Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979) dramatizes the extent to which remembering can alter or disfigure the body. In the prologue Dana, the

What occurs between these two passages explains the dismemberment and stages the very real ramifications that "prosthetic memories"—memories of events one did not live through—have for one's subjectivity. As the narrative unfolds we learn that Dana is pulled back into the past to save a little boy named Rufus, whom she discovers is her ancestor. As she moves back and forth between the present and the past, she realizes that her interventions in the past, on a slave plantation in 1819, are necessary for her existence in 1976, in the present. Rufus pulls Dana into the past whenever he is in danger, and she remains trapped there until he is safe. Each trip back in time is longer than the last, and she begins to fear that she may never get back to the present, that she may be forced to inhabit the past permanently.

This text, like Morrison's novels, unmasks the ramifications of prosthetic memories for a person's subjectivity. In Butler's world, as in Morrison's, remembering is neither a passive nor a contained endeavor but an issue of life or death. That Dana must lose an arm in the present as a direct result of her engagement with the past dramatizes the power of prosthetic memories to mold or disfigure the contours of a person's subjectivity. That Dana should end up dismembered is not incidental but is metonymically related to the actual dismemberment, physical as well as psychical, that was part and parcel of slavery. Not only were slaves viciously brutalized by masters in ways that left permanent scars, but as Barbara Omolade pointed out, the bodies of female slaves were fragmented according to their various use values to the master. As Dana "remembers" the slave lives of her ancestors, her own body is subjected to a similar kind of violence as the bruises and injuries she receives at the hands of her slave owners travel with her across time.
Butler's project is therefore a piece with Morrison's, which is to make her fictional reconstructions of slavery cause visceral responses in her readers. As Morrison explained, she tried to put the reader into the position of being naked and quite vulnerable, nevertheless trusting, to rid him of all his literary experience and all his social experiences in order to engage him in the novel. Let him make up his mind about what he likes and what he thinks and what happened based on the very intimate acquaintance with the people in the book, without any prejudices, without any prefixed notions, but to have an intimacy that's so complete, it humanizes him.52

In so doing, Morrison creates the context for an active, participatory reader: "What I really want is that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn't really reading this; that he is participating in it as he goes along."53 She attempts to tap into a well of emotion or affect that already exists in the reader, so that the scenarios she creates will become powerful to each reader in a personal way. By engaging the reader's body, Morrison hopes to implant painful memories, to produce scars that might ultimately become part of her reader's archive of experience. So while the black characters in Morrison's novels acquire memories that might be considered their cultural inheritance, she intends white readers to take on those memories, too.

While the memories that Milkman, Beloved, the Unborn Child, and Dana acquire are clearly not from their own lived experience, they are their ancestral inheritance. These memories were memories of events that their slave ancestors experienced. In each of these cases the memories foster group identity, to enhance each person's sense of being a member of a specific community. How and under what circumstances do prosthetic memories become available to those people who have no cultural claim to a particular past?

MEMORY, MASS CULTURE, AND THE MARKINGS OF THE PAST

As the topics of slavery and racial oppression are represented in more public, popular, ways, filmmakers, museum designers, and others have tried to achieve the same visceral pedagogy that Morrison and Butler achieved in their fiction. With the technologies of mass culture, it becomes even more possible to take on prosthetic memories across color lines, in effect, to take on memories that are not part of a person's ancestral inheritance or "heritage." In fact, the mass media's power to change what and how people see make them uniquely quali-
watching Roots nevertheless wish that Kunta Kinte might miraculously come back. On some level, the return of Kunta Kinte is figured at the end in the appearance of Alex Haley. One might therefore say that Roots reflects Haley’s desire to attach himself to both a slave past and an African past from which he has in some measure been severed. For Haley there exist only fragments, a few words, and from those he chose to undertake a journey, not unlike Milkman’s, in order to construct a genealogical narrative for his family. Haley described the experience of researching the book as forging the tie that links the child to its origin: “I spent half of my life,” he notes, “dragging manuscripts around. It was umbilical like Linus’ blanket.”

In his review of the novel, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt cited Haley’s experience of being called Mr. Kinte in Africa: “Mr. Kinte! Mr. Kinte!…” A sob hit me somewhere around my ankles; it came surging upward, and flinging my hands over my face I was just bawling, as I hadn’t since I was a baby.”

The power of the endeavor for Haley derives from his engagement not simply with history and but with genealogy as well. Furthermore, the effect of Haley’s discovery on his subjectivity is no less dramatic than the way that Dana’s ancestry, in Kindred, affects her present with the loss of an arm.

It hardly seems coincidental that Roots was published in 1976, the year of America’s bicentennial celebration. At the height of the bicentennial fervor—a moment when an official American history was being asserted—it was inevitable that there would be a countermove, an assertion of the unofficial histories (sanctioned, nevertheless, by the media) that complicated the larger narrative.

The power of the book was the growing number of blacks engaged in a genealogical quest to discover their ancestors. Some in ways, Roots marked the turning point in blacks’ relationship to Africa. As George Sims, Haley’s research assistant, noted, “I can remember…when blacks didn’t want to have anything to do with Africa.”

Maya Angelou made a similar point: “For centuries, we (all Americans) were led to believe that Africa was a country belonging to wild animals, where naked, primitive human beings spent their time either climbing trees, leading safari, or eating each other.”

In fact, Roots was partially responsible for the phenomenon of the hyphenated American, marking the moment when people of color began to change their self-understanding from black to African American. According to Manthia Diawara, “Afrocentricity could not have existed without Roots.” Roots spurred “increases in interest in travel to Africa,” and as the officials at American Forum for International Study noted, “Africa has become a real place in the minds of many Americans.”

The broadcasting of Roots on eight consecutive evenings in January 1977 was nothing less than a national event. The miniseries, which was toured as a precedent gamble for ABC. As it turned out, it was a staggering success: 61 percent of all households watching prime-time television were watching Roots. In fact, the ratings for the Tuesday night episode were the “third highest in television history”; “approximately 80 million people watched some part of the episode and it was seen in 31,900,000 homes.”

The collective nature of the experience, a diverse audience viewing the same story simultaneously, made a new public sphere possible. As Sy Ammen, the vice-president of program planning for ABC, noted, “It’s like millions of people reading the same book simultaneously, instead of privately, making it a shared experience.” This public and communal reception meant that people—whether or not their reactions were different—could engage in a discussion on a kind of equal footing. Even in the south, in the cities where the most vicious civil rights violence had occurred, “Roots’ dominated conversations, radio call-in shows, classroom discussions and religious sermons.”

What was new about Roots was its attempt to use the mass media to create images of slavery and, even more important, to portray a sympathetic black character with whom a white audience might identify. By granting Kunta Kinte point-of-view shots, the miniseries enabled white viewers to see through a black man’s eyes.

Not only did Roots provoke discussion about a subject that had long remained taboo, but it also had an impact on the daily lives of many Americans: Kunta Kinte became an honorific black body to which people could connect themselves or their peers. Charlayne Hunter-Gault cited incidents that now seem shocking: “A black man carrying an attaché case stepped into the elevator of the predominantly white company where he worked” and was greeted by a “white colleague, cheerfully” with the following address—“Good morning, Kunta Kinte.”

In another instance, the mother of a four-year-old related, “I was having a hard time getting my 4-year-old up… but, at one point I said, ‘Okay, Mandinka warrior. Time to go hunting in the forest.’ He smiled, opened his eyes and rolled out.” Kunta Kinte became more than a role model. He became, in effect, a body that could be worn, a black identity that could be inhabited with pride instead of shame. This was particularly clear in the explosion of babies named Kunta Kinte and Kizzy: twenty babies in New York City alone were given those names in February 1977. The mother of Kunta Kinte Reid explained that “like Kunta Kinte, he should be free, and he should be somebody and know that he is somebody.” Mr. Reid added, “It’s a name with some pride to it.”

Mr. and Mrs. Reid, neither of whom finished high school, were determined that their child’s life would be different: “He’s going to have an education... and get out and do things. He’s not going to hang out there on those streets—there’s nothing out there on those streets.”
The controversy only amplified Morrison’s belief in the intimate relationship between fiction and memory, that “the act of invention is bound up with memory.” Both she and Haley tried to create an “emotional memory—what the nerves and skin remember as well as how it appeared.” This controversy pointedly raises the question of why people are fascinated with the past; is it in order to know what “really happened” or to be interrogated? In the case of genealogy, at least, the answer seems to be the latter. Genealogy is for the living, not the dead. Constructing genealogies of this kind is a way of claiming connection to experiences one did not have and, in the process, racializing oneself. Kunte Kinte is meaningful to Americans because he possesses an honorific body imprinted by history. He represents a black body that Americans can inhabit to remember prosthetically a past that has for too long been the site of a shameful silence.

But if Roots enabled black viewers to embrace their African American heritage, the effect of the miniseries on white viewers was not so clear-cut. While white Americans surely sympathized with the plight of Kunte Kinte, they were equally taken with the project of exploring their own roots. In other words, Haley’s engagement with genealogy—more than the specifics of his African ancestry—emerged as an important modality for all Americans. It is noteworthy, too, that Alex Haley’s interest in his “roots” derived not from a fascination with Africa per se but was inspired by his visit to the Rosetta stone. In London, when Haley saw the famous tablet, it became a catalyst for him. That is, his encounter with the key to the decoding of the Egyptian hieroglyphics led Haley to remember African words he had heard in his childhood. In other words, it was not his own relationship to his blackness that ignited Haley’s genealogical desires but this other window into the past. Furthermore, in the year of the U.S. bicentennial celebrations, the question of America’s—and Americans—origins had a particular urgency. As Maya Angelou pointed out, “The discoveries in ‘Roots’ have inspired Americans, both black and white, to re-examine their origins.” An observation that was supported by a Gallup poll. Haley himself called Roots a “universal story,” and what was striking about the miniseries was in fact its portability. While it enabled many whites to see through black eyes for the first time, what emerged from the experience of Roots was not so much a critique of white oppression as an appreciation of the importance and power of genealogy.

The power of Roots lay in its mass circulation and its ability to generate large-scale public discussion about a long-taboo subject. Nevertheless, this achieve-
storming lynching mobs but the quest to save the black children of Rosewood moves the story forward; the mob scenes and Lynchings are actually obstacles to narrative movement. The importance of saving the children is stressed at the end by a textual epilogue informing us that the sworn testimony of the children of Rosewood made the film possible. It is their words that made visible an unwritten and underrepresented history.

But this film, unlike the other texts I have described, also foregrounds a white child. In one of its first scenes, a white man in Sumner, one who subsequently reveals himself as the most virulently and violently racist of the bunch, teaches his son Emmett to hunt. This scene initiates what becomes a veritable obsession of the film: the teaching of children. When Emmett and Arnott, an African American boy from Rosewood, are playing together at the beginning of the film, Emmett’s father warns, “I don’t want you around that nigger boy—You’ll be a man soon. I’ll getya there.” Racial prejudice, the film suggests, is not natural but learned. Emmett is brought along with the Lynch mob and lives through a series of pedagogical events. In one instance his father teaches him how to make a noose (see figure 7). Later his father forces him to look into a mass grave (see figure 8). Emmett shakes his head and walks away with tears in his eyes. When his father asks him why he is crying, he says, “There’s babies in there.” “Nigger is nigger, boy,” his father responds. The lesson here, and the fundamental premise of racial prejudice, is that blacks are black before they are human.

As the film draws to a close, many of the children of Rosewood do escape, but at great cost: the once thriving town is now smoldering ash, destroyed by racial hatred. But the film does not end there. In the final scene, in the white town of Sumner, Emmett is standing outside his father’s cabin with all his worldly possessions tied to a stick. “Where you going boy?” his father asks. “I hate you,” Emmett responds, “You ain’t no man.” And then he walks away. Ultimately, the film’s vision is intimately tied to children’s “vision”: that of both the children of Rosewood who have testified to this past and Emmett, the white child, who has the capacity to see differently. By looking as if through black eyes, he is able to see through the reified, naturalized structures of societal and institutional racism. The price of this vision, though, is high: for it requires him to disinherit himself; it is as if he, too, must be natally alienated in order to see the structures of oppression. In some ways, then, Emmett becomes the model for the white spectator who must learn to see as if through black eyes. This kind of vision, Singleton suggests, is the only way to prevent the structures of oppression from reproducing themselves. Rosewood, then, points the way out of the dilemma first posed by Roots. Through the character of Emmett, Singleton’s film stages a process whereby white viewers
can recognize and reject racism. But unlike 1969, which enabled white viewers to apply the notion of genealogy to their own lives, Rosewood, which focused on the specific events of those four days in Florida, is not as transportable: seeing through black eyes in Rosewood means seeing "through" the reified ideologies of white supremacy.

Singleton uses cinematic identification to create the conditions under which audience members can acquire prosthetic memories. The film deploys specific cinematic techniques intended to elicit identification with both the African American characters and also, at the end, the little white boy Emmett. This kind of cinematic identification has pedagogical value because it forces identification across racial lines; it positions white people to look at the world through black eyes. The point is not that white moviegoers forget their whiteness but that they are forced to look at the world from a perspective that is not naturally their own and that such an experience enables them to acquire prosthetic memories. Emmett's ability to leave his home, to turn away from his father, and to reject his father's white supremacist beliefs is enabled by his memories: his memory of his father calling his friend Arnett a nigger, his memory of being forced to make a noose, and his memory of seeing the mass grave filled with black bodies—and babies. In identifying with Emmett, we too acquire those memories. They are not memories of events we lived through, as they are for Emmett, yet through an act of prosthesis enabled by cinematic identification, they become part of our archive of memory. They enable us to "remember" the specific event, the Rosewood massacre, but also the broader historical terrain—the organized racism that persisted well into the twentieth century. In other words, the past that the film makes visible is one that has social relevance in the present and might be instrumental in enabling a white person to experience empathy for African Americans, as Emmett does for the residents of Rosewood.

As I have argued, learning to see differently, to challenge his father's racism, comes at a high cost for Emmett: he must run away, severing ties with his family. In this way, Rosewood's pedagogical message is quite different from the assimilationism of the immigration texts I examined in the last chapter. The immigration texts require nothing of "native" white Americans, insisting instead that immigrants transform themselves, forget their foreign pasts, and construct new American memories. The film The Road to Yesterday, for example, holds out the promise of a harmonious union between Americans and immigrants by finally uniting the characters of Ken and Malena. But to achieve that union requires that Malena, the film's "other," the stand-in for the nation's "new immigrants," forget her Gypsy past and remake herself. By contrast, Singleton's film puts the onus for national reconciliation squarely on white shoulders. By asking white audiences to see historical racism as a through black eyes and by "seeing through" the reified ideologies of white supremacy, Rosewood deploys prosthetic memory to much more progressive ends.

To return to where this chapter began: the issue of vision seems crucial to Detroit's Museum of African American History, too. The museum attempts to teach people—white and black—to see differently. Like Rosewood, in which Singleton constructs a radiant image of Rosewood and its citizens, the Detroit museum represents racial oppression and also black triumph. Through experiences at museums and in movie theaters, mass culture enables the production of prosthetic memories, memories that give people access to events that are not their "natural" or biological inheritance. If a form of mass cultural pedagogy is possible, then the issue of audience and address is of the utmost importance. Rosewood ends in the white town of Sumner because Singleton is as much concerned with the white viewer as with the African American viewer. It seems important for many reasons that Detroit have a large-scale African American history museum, for it is a city where the large majority of the population is black. But the power of mass cultural sites also lies in their ability to engage spectators across racial lines, to create prosthetic memories even in those to whom the memories do not "properly" belong. If mass cultural sites do in fact have this pedagogical potential, should not such a museum be located in Washington D.C., the nation's political and symbolic capital? Situated among the major "national museums," an African American history museum might make it possible for visitors of all backgrounds to take on the painful memories of racial oppression and, in so doing, challenge their own assumptions and ideologies. Such prosthetic memories might in turn help them see differently, see, as Benjamin imagined, the child, with an "unsevered connection between perception and action," with vision that translates into politics.