I, Bisola Sosan, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Architecture in Architecture.

It is entitled:
The Fruits of Our Labor:
Reading Toni Morrison’s Beloved as an Oneiric Space

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The Fruits of Our Labor

Reading Toni Morrison’s _Beloved_ as an Oneiric Space

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Abstract

This thesis aims to understand the ways in which Toni Morrison has created an oneiric house in her novel *Beloved*. Using the novel’s primary setting, 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, as a vehicle to apply Gaston Bachelard’s theory of the oneiric house, it explores the ways in which Morrison’s house depicts spaces where traumas are reinscribed and then transformed. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to reveal alternative methods and sites to mediate traumas in Black-American communities. Additionally, it is important to recognize the ways in which Morrison utilizes experiences and narratives from the slave and post-Civil War eras to comment on issues currently impacting Black-American communities and draw connections to the present.

This work will expand Morrison’s concern with “freedom” to the concept of the *House*, which applies to both 124 and Sweet Home, the plantation from which Sethe escapes. Where she is concerned with “responsibility” in the novel, this thesis invokes the *Garden*, which plays a central role in understanding slavery as well as the events in her narrative. Finally, to expand upon “women’s place,” this work discusses the *Body*, more specifically constructions of Black feminine bodies and the question of autonomy over one’s self.

*The Poetics of Space*, by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, serves to contextualize these overlapping themes in architectural history. Bachelard discusses the potential for houses as sites for phenomenological studies of intimate spaces. This is most evident through his notion of the oneiric house, in which houses contain daydreams and store memories. Whichever place of dwelling one resides, one relives the sum of all previous experiences and memories oneirically. Bachelard makes his chief focus clear when he writes:
In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life... It is the human being’s first world. Before he is ‘cast into the world...’ man is laid in the cradle of the house.¹

Discovering what exactly is contained in that House which cradles us is Bachelard’s primary project. Here we also find an intersection with Morrison’s work. Her narrative journey to conceptualize freedom in womanhood leads us to 124. The traumas these characters experience resurface within 124, yet, contrary to Bachelard’s theory, Morrison’s characters had been cast into a violent world before having the opportunity to be embraced. This tension exposes just one of the ways in which slave traumas effectively subvert conventional theoretical discourse, and it informs this study.

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# Table of Contents

**Abstract**  
**Acknowledgements**

## I  
**Home, Garden, Body**  
**Inhabiting Morrison’s Oneiric Spaces**

1.1. Literature Review  
1.2. Method, Sources, Content, and Organization  
1.3. Introduction: Sweet Home(lessness)  
1.4. *The Poetics of Space*: Bachelard’s Spaces of Dwelling  
1.5. The House Personified  
1.6. Enter a Story: Interiority Versus Exteriority  
1.7. Rememory and Bachelard’s Immemorial Domain  
1.8. Fixations of Happiness in Homes and Gardens  
1.9. The Keeping Room as an Original House  
1.10. Loving Too Thick? Self-Reclamation and Preservation

## II  
**Conclusion**  
**As the Body Unfolds**

## III  
**Bibliography**
I

Home, Garden, Body

Inhabiting Morrison’s Oneiric Spaces

What if the plantation offered us something else? …What if we acknowledge that the plantation is, as Toni Morrison writes, a space that everybody runs from but nobody stops talking about, and thus that it is a persistent but ugly blueprint of our present spatial organization that holds in it a new future? Finally, if this conceptualization is possible, how might contemporary expressions of racial and spatial violence and black city geographies be grappled with anew?

Katherine McKittrick, “Plantation Futures.”
1.1. Literature Review

As *Beloved* is considered a literary classic, a range of texts analyze the story, history, home, and characters. However, the intersection between 124 and architectural theorists’ ideas have yet to be widely explored by scholars. To support the ideas that this novel still resonates with contemporary American cultures—though written to examine American culture at the time Morrison wrote the novel—through a historical narrative while exploring concepts of the home, mind, garden, and body, it was necessary to consult several essays in two works on Morrison’s writing. First, in Barbara H. Solomon’s *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison’s Beloved*, Solomon discusses some of the controversy surrounding *Beloved*’s release in 1987. There was expressed concern toward this novel addressing the subject of slavery due to American discomfort with the topic. However, these criticisms were later shattered as Morrison was awarded the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for her contributions to American literature.²

Margaret Atwood contributes her book review, acknowledging the importance of the novel’s setting in a post-civil war period which saw³ great violence inflicted on Black people. In Atwood’s view, the novel should be examined from its multiple locations and voices.⁴ Like other essays discussing Morrison’s work, Atwood touches on significant points surrounding the characters, slavery, and the mystic nature of the novel. Similarly, Elizabeth Kastor’s contribution centers largely on Sethe’s character traits and Morrison’s motivations for writing.⁵ While these essays raise issues on womanhood, perceptions of the body, and memory’s impact on the

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³ And continues to see
⁴ Margaret Atwood, “Haunted by their Nightmares” from *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison’s Beloved*, page 39.
characters, these essays do not tackle the physicality of 124 Bluestone Road. These texts are critical in understanding connections between the characters and their minds, however this thesis further grounds these ideas within the home.

In *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, Atwood’s essay once again appears, along with a number of essays and interviews spanning Morrison’s literary career until that point. Valerie Smith’s essay touches on Beloved as a subversive text on slavery and the ways Morrison exposes its effects on the body. In contrast, Marilyn Sanders Mobley writes on the mind, the narrow space between remembering and forgetting in the novel. The essays in these anthologies provide a framework for analyzing *Beloved*, which then allows for effective reading through Bachelard’s phenomenological lens.

Other important works shed light on the historical Margaret Garner and provide greater context for analyzing plantation spaces. Nikki M. Taylor’s *Driven Toward Madness* unveils more information than seen before on Margaret Garner’s case and potential reasoning for killing and attempting to kill her children. Though Morrison’s investigations began from a short newspaper clipping, Taylor shares that Garner case was, in fact, closely followed in Cincinnati despite many missing details. Of course, it was a deeply traumatic event made public and later used as an example to strengthen the pro-abolition cause. Taylor’s historical and biographical

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7 Valerie Smith, “‘Circling the Subject’: History and Narrative in *Beloved*” from *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, page 346.


findings helps to flesh out *Beloved* by comparing the real Margaret Garner with the fictional Sethe and understanding how their motivations align.

Canadian scholar Katherine McKittrick writes her “Plantation Futures” essay describing ways in which plantations can be interpreted and reimagined. Mirroring questions posed about traumatic spaces in this project, McKittrick focuses on the two plantation schemas that emerge within plantation studies: the plantation logic seen in present day that continues to repeat itself, and the plantation as a concept that precedes contemporary theories on violence toward Black people. By claiming that the plantation serves as a beginning site for many studies of phenomena in black livelihood, one can then link plantation logic to present-day spaces like prisons, impoverished areas, and underserved schools, among others. The plantation, Taylor further explains, provides context to ask the following questions: what are notable characteristics of plantation geographies? What is at stake in linking a plantation past to the present? And, if the plantation creates the context for current living conditions, how might one give it a different future? Morrison sought to draw connections to her present day in the late 1980s, McKittrick’s work allows for even deeper patterns to be drawn to contemporary conditions.\(^\text{10}\)

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\(^{10}\) Katherine McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” (*Small Axe*, vol 17, no 3 Nov 2013).
1.2. Method, Sources, Content, and Organization

This thesis utilizes qualitative analysis primarily grounded in phenomenology and literature. It is a reading of the spatial narratives of Morrison’s *Beloved* with references to the phenomenological theories proposed by Gaston Bachelard. For that reason, the primary source text for this thesis is *Beloved*, while the secondary theoretical source for the study is *The Poetics of Space*. This will also reference essays that have been written as literary analysis on the work. This project is organized in ten sections along the themes of the Home, the Mind, and the Body.

The few intersections between this literary text and architectural theory necessitates a thorough reading of both works to find common threads. Using Bachelard’s text as the primary framework through which this work reads *Beloved* exposes some of the deeply-rooted traumas enveloped in the novel. While literary techniques can reveal some of these underlying issues, Bachelard’s oneiric house further implements the home’s interior into the form one’s trauma takes.
1.3. Introduction: Sweet Home(lessness)

How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can’t stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed.\(^{11}\)

The Sweet Home plantation in Morrison’s work served as the site from which the enslaved characters escaped or attempted to escape. This traumatic place, Sweet Home, and a deepened sense of homelessness are inseparable in *Beloved*. This fact is made evident in the above question and remark by Denver, Sethe’s—the novel’s protagonist—seventeen-year-old daughter. By this point in the novel, Denver and Sethe had been living alone in 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati for about eight years. With Sethe’s mother in-law passed away, sons who have left home, and first daughter haunting the home, one might wonder if there is some truth to Denver’s statement. Eighteen years prior to living in Cincinnati, Sethe had been a slave at Sweet Home in Kentucky with her soon-to-be husband Halle Suggs, brothers Paul D, Paul A, Paul F, and Sixo. On this afternoon that Denver asks why Sweet Home’s nostalgic grip is so strong, Paul D had come to visit. For the first time since fleeing the plantation, Sethe reunites with someone from her past; her husband never arrived. Modern conceptions of reunions typically involve a period of catching up, asking where they have been and what their plans are for the future are. However, when dealing with traumas of slavery, just knowing an old friend is alive is news worth celebrating. The path to the present differs from person to person and often, there is more pain embedded in the journey. Under 124’s roof, Sethe and Paul D’s feelings of loss, relief, pain, fear, and hope thicken the air, perhaps saying more than a story could.

\(^{11}\) *Morrison, Beloved*, page 16.
In response to Denver’s comment, Paul D then Sethe, respectively, tell her that “‘it wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home.’ ‘But it’s where [they] were…’ ‘All together. Comes back whether [they] want it to or not.’”

Sweet Home is an ironic naming for a plantation for several reasons. Here, one might read it as a home that was really not; a real place with imaginary comfort, fabricated sweetness that quickly turns bitter against one’s teeth. Contrary to what Denver presumes, reminiscing about Sweet Home does not, in fact make it a better place. This conversation instead circles around those things which continue to haunt them. If, as Sethe and Paul D suggest, these memories come back regardless, perhaps diverting its path to the days containing harmless stories and forced laughter will keep the haunting thing away. The name also forces one to complicate the symbolic nature of homes. Such is the case with Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, which raises the house as a viable site to understand imagination. When reading Beloved through this lens, one must ask: what is a home? If we are to take the house for “…its unity and its complexity… to integrate all the special values in one fundamental value,” then what might one consider Sweet Home? Can it be an oneiric house, which Bachelard defines as a pleasant home that stores one’s combined daydreams and memories?

One might argue that it is the oneiric house for all those who inhabited Sweet Home because it is where they experienced their formative years together. However, one should caution against using Sweet Home, or any plantation, as an example of an oneiric space because it would suggest a sense of ownership and safety. Bachelard, if “…asked to name the chief benefit of the house… the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.” By this definition, the plantation at Sweet Home could not function as a true

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12 *Morrison, Beloved*, page 16.
13 *Bachelard, The Poetics of Space*, page 3.
14 Ibid., page 6.
home for those enslaved. If they were able to daydream, it was in order to keep themselves from being swallowed by the madness of their condition. They did not own this space, nothing in Sweet Home was theirs, not the clothes they wore, nor the masculinity that Sweet Home’s men so proudly bore\textsuperscript{15}—for it was ever so kindly bestowed upon them by Mr. Garner, the plantation owner. The context in which Bachelard writes critiques postwar modernist apartment dwellings, claiming that the multi-story buildings do not allow for adequate daydreaming. Despite speaking to this specific era, some of Bachelard’s thoughts can be repurposed to further understand how spaces function in \textit{Beloved}. He also writes:

\begin{quote}
Can one sense now the difference in oneiric richness between the country house constructed truly on the earth, in an enclosure, in its own universe, and the edifice in which a few compartments serve for our lodging and which is constructed only on the asphalt of cities?\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Clearly, Sweet Home and other plantations did not contain high-rise apartment buildings, however, this logic can be used to see how Sweet Home opposes the oneiric label. As with these modern French apartments, enslaved people on plantations were relegated to small, specified areas. These spaces were primarily used for sleeping, cooking, and other basic living habits. A place like Sweet Home might serve oneirically for Mr. and Mrs. Garner, but for the others inhabiting the space, it merely acts as a nightmare-filled property. That said, though it is not an oneiric house, Sweet Home \textit{was} a place of dwelling, which has an important function for Bachelard. Its presence reappears via imagination and memory in other spaces of dwelling. For Sethe specifically, this occurs at several points, but catalyzed most vividly by Paul D’s arrival.

\textsuperscript{15} See \textit{Beloved}, page 12.
One of the most present literary tropes in *Beloved* is the classic visitation narrative. Typically, readers must figure out the rules of the world in the novel—even if the novel exists in the contemporary era—through the narrative voice, perspective, characters, and setting. When the novel is set in a home, part of this learning period requires them to understand the schedule and way in which things are run by the characters inhabiting the home. The novel establishes its “normal,” which is then broken by the impending visitor. This disrupting agent can break up the characters’ normalcy in a variety of ways, whether it primarily affects the characters or the housing structure itself. In *Beloved*, there are two primary disrupting agents who cause change to 124: Paul D and Beloved. The novel is unique in that there is no specific order to the narrative chronology. The reader dips into the past before being brought back up into the narrative present and almost immediately rinsed with another haunting from Sweet Home; we are baptized by Morrison’s nonlinear timeline. Because of this, Paul D’s visitation occurs rather early, before the reader can understand the layout of 124, or really know what kind of people Sethe and Denver are. In fact, we know more about 124’s characteristics and how it came to be such a spiteful home. Upon analysis, this early visitation shouts its discordance, but while reading, Paul D enters as if it had only been a few days that he was gone.

The house, 124, displays an immediate reaction to this visitor, foreshadowing his subsequent relationship with it. When Sethe invites him inside he “… [follows] her through the door straight into a pool of red and undulating light that [locks] him where he stood.”¹⁷ 124’s salient grief marks him as with each step, he seems to change the home more. Within hours of his arrival, both women inhabiting 124 are weeping. “Not even trying, he had become the kind of

¹⁷ *Morrison, Beloved*, page 10.
man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could."18 Paul D, soaked with 124’s grief, causes Denver to soak the stovetop with her tears, and Sethe to release her own sorrow while he stands arched behind her in an embrace. Denver had been holding her tears in for nine years despite everything she had gone through in the house because it is not the house, in all its chaos, that threatens her routine, it is the disrupting agent. Soon after the women cry in his presence, Paul D causes yet another change when 124’s baby ghost starts rocking the house.

It took him awhile to realize that his legs were not shaking because of worry, but because the floorboards were and the grinding, shoving floor was only part of it. The house itself was pitching.19

The house once again rejects the visitation, perhaps because it knows that Paul D will bring irreversible changes to their lives. Denver, Sethe, and her mother in-law Baby Suggs dealt with the ghost primarily through inaction. Though it drove Sethe’s other sons, Howard and Buglar, out, the women simply cleaned up after its messes. In stark contrast:

Somehow, [Paul D] managed to stand at an angle and, holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house… Paul D did not stop whipping the table around until everything was rock quiet… The three of them, Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, breathed to the same beat, like one tired person. Another breathing was just as tired.20

In an altered version of the visitation narrative, the home rejects the disruptor while the characters take him in. Though Denver feels negatively toward Paul D for effectively taking away her mother and getting rid of the ghost which kept her company—for she had been isolated in 124 for nearly a decade—she does not attempt to kick him out. His visitation not only changes

19 Ibid., page 21.
20 Ibid., page 22.
the function of 124, it also displaces Denver and Sethe within their home. These characters who escaped the Sweet Home that wasn’t a true home must now face another kind of homelessness as they adjust to the consecutive changes that occur in 124 brought on by Paul D’s presence.

Before Paul D came and sat on her porch steps, words whispered in the keeping room had kept her going. Helped her endure the chastising ghost; refurbished the baby faces of Howard and Buglar and kept them whole in the world because in her dreams she only saw their parts in trees; and kept her husband shadowy but there—somewhere.\(^\text{21}\)

Prior to Paul D’s disruption, the house kept Sethe sane. Though isolated, the familiar walls felt safe, she could do no harm inside and none could threaten her security. These conversations between herself and God, or someone like Him, inside 124 provide a glimpse of what regular life meant for Sethe and Denver. This is important to recognize so one can easily determine the point at which the narrative departure occurs. The moment of disruption shows readers just how the house and its inhabitants shift toward a new routine that eventually becomes normal.

There is a trend in *Beloved* of seeing characters deeply affected by the resurrected ghost's presence. This may seem an obvious statement, as Beloved is the primary visitation agent who enacts change. However, she also manages to affect those only marginally connected to her. Though Paul D did beat out the ghost and attempt to take Sethe from Beloved, the two have no other shared history to suggest she knows any of the contents in his internal tin—the metaphorical tin Paul D uses to contain his traumatic memories. It could be the something “more”\(^\text{22}\) that Beloved embodies which forces things open. In her presence, the winds gather and

\(^{21}\) *Morrison, Beloved*, page 101.
blow open all those hidden corners, boxes, and rooms that Bachelard notes as critical stores of our daydreams.

One can perhaps think of this swift and violent change through what Bachelard calls the “poetic image.” He defines this as a phenomenology of imagination whereby sudden salience of an idea occurs at the surface of the psyche.\(^{23}\) As Bachelard comes to understand, it is impossible to apply scientific methods to a philosophy of poetry: “…philosophical reflection applied to scientific thinking elaborated over a long period of time requires any new idea to become integrated in a body of tested ideas.”\(^{24}\) As one can consider this fictional, haunted residence a poetic space/image, analyzing the changes within 124 requires engaging in moments. While the novel does trace its shifts across time—the feast, the killing, Howard and Buglar running, Baby Suggs passing, Paul D’s disruption, Beloved’s arrival—as one can see, they are described as independent shifts unique to 124. Because of Morrison’s nonlinear method of storytelling, readers are not given the complete context leading to Beloved’s return. Regardless, readers can understand that 124’s changes are unusual and sudden. When encountering the poetic image, it is immediately understood without necessarily including the process.\(^{25}\)

\(\textit{Beloved}\) is certainly an unusual story in many ways, and for some, it takes time to orient themselves in the setting. Those used to ghost stories assuming its spirits are fictional will have a more difficult time believing the characters, perhaps even thinking the whole story is imaginary. But because the protagonists treat ghosts as a regular aspect of reality, the reader should have the

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\(^{23}\) Bachelard, \textit{The Poetics of Space}, page xi.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., page xiii.
same mindset. To really comprehend why 124 haunts so tangibly, readers must piece together the shards scattered throughout the novel that unveil Sethe’s history leading to their isolation.

After living there for five years, Sethe and the other slaves of Sweet Home plan to escape after Mr. Garner, dies, resulting in his sick wife recruiting her brother-in-law to run the plantation. The abusive Schoolteacher—as Sethe calls him—convinces the Sweet Home slaves to run, however, Sethe and her kids are the only ones to make it out the night they planned. Sethe, six months pregnant with Denver, sends her other three children ahead while she waits for her husband, Halle. When he does not come to meet her, she makes the decision to take off herself. If not for the near-miraculous appearance of Amy Denver, the daughter of a white indentured servant, Sethe would have died before crossing the Ohio River. While crossing, Sethe goes into labor and against all odds, gives birth to another daughter inside of a leaking boat by the hands of a whitegirl going to Boston. The community watchman, Stamp Paid, stands right by the riverbank to help Sethe with the newborn and arrange to get her to 124 Bluestone Road where her mother-in-law awaits. Just twenty-eight days after Sethe’s arrival in 124, nearly a month of experiencing freedom, friendship, choice, the air in the home shifts as a spirit grows spiteful.

On the twenty-eighth day, Schoolteacher, his sons, and a sheriff arrive in Cincinnati to take back Sethe and her children under the Fugitive Slave Act. With nowhere to hide, she flies into the woodshed outside of 124 and takes a handsaw to her children. Rather than see them die under slavery, she would rather do it by her own hand. She cuts the throat of one, the two-year-old daughter she sent ahead. Howard and Buglar barely survive, Stamp Paid steps in to grab Denver before Sethe flings her against the wall. Schoolteacher leaves, knowing these slaves
would no longer be useful, and the town sheriff steps in. Sethe is only allowed out of jail for her unnamed toddler’s burial. Unable to afford a complete tombstone, Sethe agrees to ten minutes of sex with the engraver in order to get a single word from the Pastor’s sermon: Beloved. As the casket enters the ground, the baby ghost occupies the home. Thus begins the 124 in the novel’s narrative present, created by a handsaw and a pink tombstone. Several characters in *Beloved* question the decision to stay in a house so haunted; Sethe herself considers leaving for a period of time but ultimately, she refuses to run away again.

Applying Bachelard’s theory to a work of fiction like *Beloved* works because, to some, stories dealing with slavery often seem so unimaginable that it effectively blurs the line between truth and fiction. This means that when even biographies read like works of fiction, *Beloved* could well be a story rooted in Margaret Garner’s direct personal account rather than a news clipping. Historian Katherine McKittrick briefly discusses this tradition of slave narratives in literature. Plantations specifically, served as the setting through which many works of fiction evolved. She reveals how plantation plots and narrative plots intersect, writing:

> Secretive histories can be found in the *plots*: the plot or the central narrative of the plantation novel that contextualizes its economic superstructure while developing a creative space to challenge this system… the plot illustrates a social order that is developed within the context of a dehumanizing system as it spatializes what would be considered impossible under slavery: the actual growth of narratives, food, and cultural practices that materialize the deep connections between blackness and the earth and foster values that challenge systemic violence.  

This, in part, mirrors the ways this project uses literature as a tool for learning heavier theory and recontextualizing contemporary issues. McKittrick provides an apt summary for a way that a

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fictional lens can function and why it is necessary to view *Beloved's* home spaces through Bachelard’s theory as well as literary features.
1.4. *The Poetics of Space: Bachelard’s Spaces of Dwelling*

Another way to identify motivation for staying in a haunted home and its significance comes by way of philosopher Gaston Bachelard. His work, *The Poetics of Space*, offers a framework to understand how homes function on a phenomenological level. While Morrison’s *Beloved* stands on its own as a complete work analyzed by historians, literary, feminist, and African American scholars, the novel also lends itself to architectural interpretations, specifically through a phenomenological lens. When juxtaposed with slavery, new meanings and relationships between a person and their space of dwelling begin to emerge. Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* seeks to prove that “…the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind.”27 124 serves as an apt site to investigate these claims because it is host to so many haunting memories. Bachelard’s primary concern of the house and its connection to memories lies in a question he asks his readers:

> Transcending our memories of all the houses in which we have found shelter, above and beyond all the houses we have dreamed we lived in, can we isolate an intimate, concrete essence that would be a justification of the uncommon value of all our images of protected intimacy?28

Bachelard asks if it is possible to trace our memories and dreams of every place in which we have dwelled to one “original” intimate space. One might also understand this as a method of understanding attachment to spaces, Bachelard raises issue with writers who describe a home without “…really experiencing its primitiveness… which belongs to all, rich and poor alike, if

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28 Ibid., page 3.
they are willing to dream.” While this idea appears idyllic in its equality, Bachelard’s views on “primitive” spaces points to a bias indicative of his own sheltered unawareness. He writes:

The hermit’s hut is an engraving that would suffer from any exaggeration of picturesqueness… The hut immediately becomes centralized solitude, for in the land of legend, there exists no adjoining hut… And there radiates about this centralized solitude a universe of meditation and prayer… It possesses the felicity of intense poverty; indeed, it is one of the glories of poverty; as destitution increases it gives us access to absolute refuge.

Certainly, Bachelard favors an optimistic view on his concepts, but there comes a point when optimism breaches into willful ignorance. As someone writing in the post-war period, noting the devastation across his country and among countless people, how oblivious can a philosopher be to claim glories in poverty? Bachelard is using poverty as a simple means of furthering his theoretical journey. Rather than make a case for simplicity and writing against rampant consumerism, or attempting to understand nightmarish situations through one’s space, he instead makes light of impoverished people and the realities of living with less wealth. Similarly to modern environmentalists who encourage practices that would be impractical to less wealthy and/or disabled people, Bachelard ignores reality and suggests an idealized form of poverty only accessible to a select group of people.

In The Poetics of Space, Bachelard does not attempt to tell readers a method for discovering this original home, he instead only builds a case for the home serving as a space that contains dreams, thoughts, and memories. Though Bachelard’s work proves useful in analyzing

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30 Ibid., page 32.
31 Using less fuel, for example, is difficult when many underserved neighborhoods have little access to public transit and live too far from their (often minimum wage) workplace to bike. Plastic straws too aid many disabled people unable to eat otherwise, but nationwide bans further dismiss their well-being.
Beloved, The Poetics of Space also reveals a number of biases affecting him. Drawing out some of these inconsistencies and biases present in Bachelard’s text is critically important when using it as a resource. By placing Morrison’s Beloved in conjunction with The Poetics of Space, this project utilizes the concepts Bachelard proposes in order to discover how and where we take root as well as the significance of dwelling spaces.

As previously mentioned, one can argue that Sweet Home might act as Sethe’s oneiric house, the house she was “born” in, because her experiences there helped shape the protagonist seen in the novel’s narrative present. For Bachelard, one must go back to the house they were actually born in to find the essence of intimate attachment. He writes:

To inhabit oneirically the house we were born in means more than to inhabit it in memory; it means living in this house that is gone, the way we used to dream in it… centers of boredom, centers of solitude, centers of daydream group together to constitute the oneiric house which is more lasting than the scattered memories of our birthplace.32

This statement is reminiscent of Sethe and Paul D’s conversations surrounding Sweet Home. Although they no longer live on Sweet Home, its memories continually approach them as if stepping in, uninvited, through an open door. Before one can point to Sweet Home as Sethe’s oneiric house, however, one must consider that enslaved people were regarded as property from the moment they arrived at “home.” Bachelard’s theory did not consider the situation of enslavement and suggests that this original home is owned by the dreamer or their family. As previously discussed, the oneiric home implies some form of ownership, which no slave could have. Even freed slaves like Baby Suggs struggled with this concept of ownership. One must

32 Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, pages 16- 17.
also recognize that Bachelard’s idea applies nearly exclusively to nuclear families who can afford living in a single multi-story home as opposed to an apartment. He clings to a nostalgia for older, “better” times in which people presumably had deeper connections to the earth and self through a home. Instead of adapting his theory to a time of mass desolation and encouraging his readers to confront both positive and terrible daydreams—to unearth those dusty objects in one’s cellar—Bachelard insists on targeting a small population. After an uncomfortable conversation with Paul D, in which he suggests she just leave 124 with Denver, Sethe contemplates what he tells her so casually after an eighteen-year absence.

She needed to get up from there, go downstairs and piece it all back together. This house he told her to leave as though a house was a little thing… She who had never had one but this one; she who left a dirt floor to come to this one; she who had to bring a fistful of salsify into Mrs. Garner’s kitchen every day just to be able to… feel like some part of it was hers, because she wanted to love the work she did, to take the ugly out of it, and the only way she could feel at home on Sweet Home was if she picked some pretty growing thing and took it with her.33

Carefully reading Sethe’s response to 124, her struggles to assure herself that she was worthy of owning something show how heavily the emotions she brought from the plantation weighed on her. There is a strong alignment between Morrison and Bachelard on the relationship between one’s old home and new home, though in the latter case, the old home primarily contains positive memories that the occupant carries to the new home. The home also becomes an entity that frees them from the problems of the outer world while simultaneously imprisoning them. Bachelard expressed these relationships as follows:

> Whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter: we shall see the imagination build ‘walls’ of impalpable shadows, comfort

33 *Morrison, Beloved*, pages 26-27.
itself with the illusion of protection… In short, in the most interminable of dialectics, the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams. It is no longer in its positive aspect that the house is really ‘lived,’ nor is it only in the passing hour that we recognize its benefits. An entire past comes to dwell in a new house. The old saying: ‘We bring our lares with us’ has many variations.  

Owning a home, owning anything, holds great significance to Sethe as well as any slave hoping to escape from bondage. The primary reason to argue that 124 is Sethe’s Original House, as Bachelard indicates, is because it is hers. Though she did not purchase it, Sethe lives in 124 as opposed to living on Sweet Home. Even Baby Suggs, whose freedom was bought in exchange for her son Halle working on outside plantations during the weekends, recounts her first realization of freedom with great surprise.

And when she stepped foot on free ground she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn’t; that Halle, who had never drawn one free breath, knew that there was nothing like it in this world… suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, ‘These hands belong to me. These my hands.’ Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? 

In order for Bachelard’s theory to hold true, a sense of belonging must occur. One cannot attempt to discover the essence of attachment for a space from which one hopes to escape. His suggestions presuppose application to those who experience a “…childhood [that] is certainly greater than reality.” For Sethe, who remembers that she was born on a slave ship, the only
child her mother did not throw overboard,\(^{37}\) childhood and reality were one in the same: a barrage of constant trauma.

According to Bachelard, attempting to describe one’s Oneiric Home is akin to visiting a museum filled with relics: it always returns to the past. Therefore, an oneiric house proves difficult to describe without recalling other memories. He claims:

> For the real houses of memory, the houses to which we return in dreams, the houses that are rich in unalterable oneirism, do not readily lend themselves to description. To describe them would be like showing them to visitors.\(^{38}\)

In reading Morrison’s dense work, one might be struck by the intimate details the omniscient narrator provides of these characters; their minds are pried open for readers to dig through. Because of the thick viscosity *Beloved* holds, it might be easy to overlook parts of the novel which are distinctly absent; chiefly, descriptions of 124. We know of its—her?—character, 124’s violent tendencies, its—her?—ability to withhold tears and drive out men, but there is remarkably little known about the farmhouse’s physical traits. Readers know it is a two-story home with the kitchen and keeping room\(^ {39}\) on the ground floor while Sethe and Denver’s rooms are accessed by going up a set of white stairs. Morrison’s description of 124, the novel’s primary setting, occurs on the first page as follows:

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\(^{37}\) “She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. She threw them all away but you The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never (74).”


\(^{39}\) Colonial kitchen attachments typically containing the fireplace and often converted into bedrooms.
…the gray and white house on Bluestone Road. It didn’t have a number then, because Cincinnati didn’t stretch that far. In fact, Ohio had been calling itself a state only seventy years…\textsuperscript{40}

Here, Morrison presents sparse physical information about 124. Readers know first that the house is spiteful before knowing that it is gray and white. She reveals that despite this home’s strong presence, its exterior is actually rather plain; it would hardly even stand out because it did not have a housing number. This lack in detail becomes apparent several more times throughout the novel, particularly when discussing Baby Suggs decline leading to her death. The events leading to Sethe cutting her baby’s throat caused Baby Suggs to collapse internally. Freedom she so cherished after decades enslaved seemed to vanish over the course of two days. In her recession, the elderly woman with a twisted hip turned her focus on colors.

Kneeling in the keeping room where she usually went to talk-think it was clear why Baby Suggs was so starved for color. There wasn’t any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout. The walls of the room were slate-colored, the floor earth brown… curtains white, and the dominating feature, the quilt… was made up of scraps of blue serge, black, brown and gray wool… Sethe looked at her hands, her bottle-green sleeves, and thought how little color there was in the house and how strange that she had not missed it the way Baby did.\textsuperscript{41}

Again, Morrison affirms that the home lacks detail and is otherwise quite bland. By emphasizing its indistinctive nature, readers can then focus on the characters rather than characteristics. It also reinforces that 124, while not the home that Sethe was birthed in, can be her Oneiric Home. Paul D also presents 124 as a house that is not impressive for its physicality, but for what it contains.

“As soon as he stepped through the red light, he knew that, compared to 124, the rest of the

\textsuperscript{40} Morrison, \textit{Beloved}, page 3.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., page 46.
world was bald.”⁴² Even within a narrative that sees ghostly hauntings as commonplace, Paul D still recognizes that there is something unusual about the baby ghost rattling the floorboards.

After the Misery, as Stamp Paid calls it, he has a conversation with a worn out Baby Suggs just as she looks to focus on color.

‘What I have to do is get in my bed and lay down. I want to fix on something harmless in this world.’

‘What world you talking about? Ain’t nothing harmless down here.’

‘Yes it is. Blue. That don’t hurt nobody. Yellow neither.’”⁴³

Far earlier in the novel, when Paul D first enters the home, the narrator gets close enough to share his perspective:

Out of the dimness of the room in which they sat, a white staircase climbed toward the blue-and-white wallpaper of the second floor. Paul D could see just the beginning of the paper; discreet flecks of yellow sprinkled among a blizzard of snowdrops all backed by blue. The luminous white of the railing and steps kept him glancing toward it.⁴⁴

It seems that blue, yellow, white, and black are the only colors visible in 124, but only Paul D, at that point a mere visitor, and Baby Suggs, who was close to quitting, can see it. Outsiders are capable of perceiving 124’s physical attributes but for those living inside, particularly Sethe, these traits are invisible in favor of memories and imaginative thoughts embedded within the home.

Understanding Beloved as a character-driven novel might make it easy to argue that lack of physical description is merely a feature of the work. Of course, the novel does not spend much

⁴² Morrison, Beloved, page 49.
⁴³ Ibid., page 211.
⁴⁴ Ibid., page 13.
time outside of 124 unless it is through a visitation of the past, but the few exterior settings receive different treatment from the haunted home. When Denver ventures outside for the first time in nine years, she heads to the only house that she can recollect vividly from her time before the Misery. Mrs. Lady Jones held classes for children, which Denver attended a few times to learn how to read until one of her peers questioned her about her mother’s act of murder and subsequent arrest. Since then, Denver had not returned, but when she does, a wave of recognition washes over her.

She would have known it anywhere… The stone porch sitting in a skirt of ivy, pale yellow curtains at the windows; the laid brick path to the front door and wood planks leading around to the back, passing under the windows where she had stood on tiptoe to see above the sill… Denver shivered inside, wiped the perspiration from her forehead and knocked.\(^{45}\)

There is a stark difference between the treatment of Lady Jones’ home compared to 124. Though Denver lived there her whole life, there is hardly acknowledgement of the interior aside from the white stairs leading to the second floor. This blatant contrast further points to 124 as an oneiric house that eludes physical description. As Bachelard claims, those without an intimate connection to the house might be able to fixate on physical descriptions compared to its inhabitants. Such is the case with Paul D toward the end of the novel when he finally returns to Sethe in 124:

Now his coming is the reverse of his going. First he stands in the back, near the cold house, amazed by the riot of late summer flowers where vegetables should be growing… the odd placement of cans jammed with the rotting stems of things, the blossoms shriveled like sores… a rope too short for anything but skip-jumping lies discarded

\(^{45}\) Morrison, *Beloved*, page 289.
near the washtub… Like a child’s house; the house of a very tall child.46

The narrator continues following Paul D’s journey back into the house with more detail than had been presented the entire book. Although he spent several months living inside 124, Paul D was not a true inhabitant. It affected him, moved him, rejected him, but this does not make it an oneiric home. Because of this, he can notice smaller details, placement that readers would otherwise miss because the narrator follows Sethe and Denver so closely that it often reads as first person. These two are so fixated on the past and their own daydreams that parts of the home have since crumbled with neglect.

Another similarity between Poetics of Space and Morrison’s use of imagery in the description of trauma and experiences within 124 occurs when Bachelard describes Carl G. Jung’s theory about the cellar and attic. He describes the owner of a house hearing a noise in the cellar, but goes instead to the attic to investigate. It is a tactical avoidance of the real source of the noise because the cellar is such a dark and mysterious entity. Attics, however, present a lighter space in which one can spend “... hours of long solitude, where the child basks in their mother’s anguish.”47 It is unclear how Bachelard positions this as a positive attribute considering he rarely mentions sadness or grief in his description of an oneiric home; however, he continues with the attic as a light space for daydreams. Bachelard also cites the attic as a sort of museum for reveries such as parents’ old clothes and memorabilia.48 Knowing this, one can immediately consider how Sethe might fit into his proposal. Without an attic, does the daydreamer lose an essential place of solitude, and is the attic the only space in an Oneiric Home that functions in

46 Morrison, Beloved, page 318.
47 Bachelard, “The Oneiric House,” page 111.
48 Ibid., page 112.
that manner? Sethe never mentions an attic existing in 124, however, the Keeping Room serves a similar purpose for her. But with Paul D’s arrival, even that space becomes less comfortable for her. *Beloved* in this moment fills a gap that Bachelard does not address: how these oneiric rooms can shift form and how that affects the daydreamer.

In contrast, the cellar represents trauma or memories that one does not want to confront which, of course, can be found on nearly every page of *Beloved*. Bachelard, though focused primarily on the house, does make a point to “… remain in the space that is polarized by the cellar and the attic, to see how this polarized space can serve to illustrate very fine psychological nuances.”49 That is to say, understanding the entities which frame the house can also help illustrate that which makes up the main interior. A cellar does in fact appear in another rare glimpse outside of 124 when Beloved drives Paul D out of the house—the haunting ghost’s newly manifested form.

> It was a tiny church no bigger than a rich man’s parlor…. The damp cellar was fairly warm, but there was no light lighting the pallet or the washbasin… And an oil lamp in a cellar was sad, so Paul D sat on the porch steps…50

According to Bachelard, the cellar must be rationalized specifically because of its dark and ambiguous nature. It is “… the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces,”51 which Paul D finds himself victim to as a man driven out of 124 by a ghost that he assumed to have beaten out just weeks before. The secondary reason why Paul D left the house comes when he finds out about the Misery. First, by Stamp Paid through a newspaper clipping, then by Sethe herself. The pastor of this church offers him the cellar as a temporary place to stay,

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50 Morrison, *Beloved*, page 257.
thereby forcing Paul D to stay continually burrowed in the darkness of his own past and uncertain future with Sethe. “Sitting on the porch of a dry-goods church… he could have these thoughts. Slow, what-if thoughts that cut deep but struck nothing solid a man could hold on to.”

Compared to the attic, well-constructed and supported, the imaginary cellar requires one to “… [dig] and [redig], making its very depth active.” As Paul D stays in the cellar, all the memories of his past, stored within an internal tobacco tin are “… blown open, [with] spilled contents that floated freely and made him their play and prey.” What he could not tell Sethe in 124, what he tried to turn from, forces itself before his eyes. This church cellar provides literal and figurative representation of Paul D’s lowest point since returning to Sethe.

As Bachelard also suggests, residing in this cellar forces Paul D to “… see shadows dancing on the dark walls.” Only when Paul D emerges from the deep dark of his captive mind, can he find some form of redemption. This comes more specifically in a follow-up conversation with Stamp Paid, who originally told him about Sethe’s chilling—necessary?—act. During this conversation, Stamp Paid also confirms the presence of Beloved’s human manifestation in 124. Doing so brings her into public consciousness, the news spreads of this haunted woman staying in 124, trapping Sethe inside. Of course, these stay mere words until Denver emerges from the home to get help from neighbors, eliciting active empathy from those who once shunned her. A man’s influence can only do so much in the presence of a baby ghost grieving over the loss of her mother’s gaze.

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52 Morrison, Beloved, page 261.
54 Morrison, Beloved, page 258.
Rather than that which remains visible to the human eye, dreams and memories can tell the true story of a home. One cannot adequately narrate the history of a home. However, we often dream about its history, which then brings us at closer proximity to the Original Home. “A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality…”\textsuperscript{56} Bachelard’s observations about the role imagination plays in the formation of a home provide an appropriate theoretical framing for Morrison who is capable of presenting readers with stories about a house as if it were a person. She reveals a story all while blurring the boundaries between histories, experiences, and time, effectively suspending the reader and forcing them to approach 124 like any other character with a past, narrative, and personality.

\textsuperscript{56} Bachelard, \textit{The Poetics of Space}, page 17.
1.5. The House Personified

Bachelard was aware that the nature of his phenomenological work added layers of complexity to his narratives about homes in *Poetics of Space*; he had to introduce some order to help the reader comprehend his work. Bachelard writes:

To bring order to the images, I believe we should consider two connecting themes: 1) A house is imagined as a vertical being. It rises upward. It differentiates itself in terms of its verticality. It is one of the appeals to our consciousness of verticality. 2) A house is imagined as a concentrated being. It appeals to our consciousness of centrality. 57

Bachelard recognizes that the themes in his work are abstract and suggests that they can be clarified with examples to present an aspect of humanness to these structures. In the foreword to the 1994 translated edition of *Poetics of Space*, John R. Stilgoe comments that “Bachelard admits that every house is first a geometrical object of planes and right angles, but asks his reader to ponder how such recolinearity so welcomes human complexity… how the house adapts to its inhabitants.” 58 Drawing from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, Bachelard shows how the house can be personified, stating that the house “suddenly [acquires] an almost human face” and is “very near us, embracing and embraced.” The poem illustrates how Bachelard gives the house human characteristics; it reads as follows:

Maison, pan de prairie, ô lumière du soir  
Soudain vous acquérez presque une face humaine  
Vous êtes de près de nous, embrassants, embrassés.

(House, patch of meadow, oh evening light  
Suddenly you acquire an almost human face  
You are very near us, embracing and embraced) 59

57 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, page 17.  
58 Ibid., page vii.  
59 Ibid., page 8.
For Morrison, the house at 124 Bluestone Road is not just the site in which Sethe and Denver take refuge from the outside world, it is also a living, breathing organism wielding power over its inhabitants. The house occupied by a ghost takes on a personified form as the house manages to express itself, and the reader is meant to comprehend 124 as a character on its own. Perhaps even an antagonistic character as Sethe and Denver must bow to the house’s commands while it persecutes them. The development of the house’s moods and actions can be summarized by the first sentences of Beloved’s three sections: 124 was spiteful; 124 was loud; 124 was quiet. Within each chapter, Morrison delves into the specifics of each characteristic. Though Sethe arguably caused the house to become this person, Denver has the most personalized relationship with the house. It is all she knows and, in the novel’s narrative present, the only company she keeps.

Shivering, Denver approached the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, signed, trembled, and fell into fits. Her steps and her gaze were the cautious ones of a child approaching a nervous, idle relative.⁶⁰

The house becomes a person who Denver approaches with hesitation and awe; she moves from her own solitary space just outside 124 back into the silent roar the house brings. This jarring contrast illustrates the pervasive strength that 124 has over its residents, but also begs a question of perception. When the house is so clearly personified, readers are more likely to view it, not just as a structure, but as an embodiment of personas hidden inside it. What might change if we decided to see other buildings as the people, spirits, and memories inhabiting those spaces? Morrison includes several examples of this personified house in such a way that does not make it entirely clear if it is the spirit controlling the house. By confusing boundaries between spirit and

⁶⁰Morrison, Beloved, page 35.
structure, Morrison also allows readers to more clearly understand how characters in a novel are deeply influenced by the setting. Forcing the primary setting into the foreground makes its importance unavoidable as 124 in all its hauntings determines the course of events in *Beloved*.

Often, 124’s actions reflect those who are inside: “Something in the house braced, and in the listening quiet that followed Sethe spoke.”⁶¹ This suggests that the house has the ability to listen and give Sethe space to speak. The house is, after all, who Sethe turned to when conversing in the keeping room. Perhaps this also suggests that the house, personified, can also predict what Sethe will say. If a place of dwelling contains all prior memories which manifest in daydreams, might the house seek out and conjure these images? Bachelard suggests that different rooms in any place of dwelling function to contain these symbolic daydream-memories. A room with more clutter, more crevices, places to hide, might have more deeply internalized memories waiting to be unearthed. In—one of—*Beloved*’s climactic event(s), we learn that 124 is filled with more than just the baby’s spite. It is difficult to imagine a grand feast as the event leading to Sethe being found in the woodshed, surrounded by four bloodied children. Yet, Baby Suggs, then holy, gave to the community and received disdain for her efforts.

From Denver’s two thrilled eyes it grew to a feast for ninety people. 124 shook with their voices far into the night. Ninety people who ate so well and laughed so much, it made them angry… 124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety, made them angry. Too much, they thought.⁶²

Again, Morrison demonstrates how 124’s personality is reflective of those who are in it and around it. The house, which was at joyful one day, suddenly contains too much, outpours too

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⁶¹ *Morrison, Beloved*, page 18.
⁶² Ibid., page 161.
much, loves too much, feeds too much, and now harbors spite. If not for the neighbors becoming angry with Baby Suggs’ kindness, would the ghost Beloved have retaliated to the extent that she does over the course of the novel?

Perhaps Beloved herself hints at this upon her initial arrival in 124. She emerges from the water, dressed head-to-toe in all black and can hardly manage to keep her head lifted. Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, having just arrived from a town carnival, discover this strange woman sitting on a stump outside the house and take her in. What stranger, after all, would willingly stop in front of the site of decade-old terror if it was not an emergency? As Beloved lies in the keeping room, sighing but saying nothing, “… Denver panicked. ‘What is it?’ she would ask. ‘Heavy,’ murmured Beloved. “This place is heavy.” Beloved, the ghost-then house-then person, can feel the weight of every emotion sitting in 124. Readers later learn that this manifestation of Beloved may have been something “more” than just the unnamed baby ghost. This sentiment provides a glance at that possibility. The site of trauma still leaves a heaviness despite the ghost appearing in a new form, which also establishes the house as its own entity, capable of displaying and mirroring emotion.

Before encountering Beloved, Denver’s perspective on the house’s influence is drastically different. She does not believe that the ghost is so malicious that it prevents people from approaching. She is more likely to view 124 through a favorable lens because she had no one to make her feel less alone besides the ghost. When the disrupting agent enters the home and causes her to cry, she reaches her emotional limit and reveals that she feels isolated in 124.

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63 *Morrison, Beloved, page 65.*
‘I can’t live here. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I can’t live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by…’

‘It’s the house. People don’t—’

‘It’s not! It’s not the house. It’s us! And it’s you!’

Upon Paul D’s arrival, Denver mourns a stark loneliness that she had felt for nine years but managed to hold in thanks to the company of the house. But in this moment when her sanctuary is interrupted, Denver weeps. To Sethe, the house, personified, is the one repelling visitors because it is the site of horror. The original overabundance coming from its walls along with the sad, spiteful red that engulfed Paul D deter neighbors from even lingering in the front yard. However, for Denver, it is the woman—Sethe—who created the nature of the house. Although one might argue Baby Suggs’ generosity established the spite, it might have easily dissipated if not for Sethe’s actions. Personifying the house easily lends itself to better understanding Bachelard’s oneiric house, for what better way to present such a significant space than a living, breathing house? Morrison’s 124 Bluestone Road changes the way readers approach home settings in a novel because one is forced to see it as a character rather than mere architectural structure. Its rather mundane physical descriptions lends itself to a livelier interior with “personality”—an expression that Morrison also turns on its head. 124’s architectural form, which has memory embedded into it, then becomes personified. This play with interiors versus exteriors reappears through the novel’s rich metaphors and narrative structure.

64 Morrison, Beloved, page 17.
1.6. Enter a Story: Interiority Versus Exteriority

Those writing about the “humble home’s” inherent beauty often miss the mark, claims Bachelard. He states that these writers spend so little time describing the house that they simply describe what they see without actually understanding its primitive form.65 A humble space does not necessitate sparse description and can often reveal more than the space suggests. Bachelard believes that reading a home brings forth its “poetic image,” by adopting a more subjective method of observation. Unlike the philosophy of science that depends on tested knowledge and foundations for the introduction of new ideas, “the philosophy of poetry… has no past, at least no recent past, in which its preparation and appearance could be followed.”66 The poetic image is simultaneously visible and invisible because it is grounded in subjectivity. Like the house that has not yet been deeply investigated, the poetic image “…[lies] dormant in the depth of the unconscious.”67 Later in the text, Bachelard returns to the unconscious, stating: “I pointed out earlier that the unconscious is housed. It should be added that it is well and happily housed, in the space of its happiness. The normal unconscious knows how to make itself at home everywhere…”68 Herein lies another place of contention in the text. Bachelard makes a habit of describing “ideal” articulations of space, only keeping in mind specific French populations. As is evident in Beloved, there are swaths of people who cannot claim a happily housed unconscious. While Bachelard does not specifically elaborate on this, one can imply that an unconscious mind resting in a negative space reflects upon the daydreamer’s exterior.

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66 Ibid., page xv.
67 Ibid., page xvi.
68 Ibid., page 10.
There are parallels between Morrison’s method of storytelling in *Beloved*, and Bachelard’s declarations on the (in)visibility, dormancy, and the esoteric subjective approaches to comprehending the poetic image. Although approaching the story of *Beloved* reveals a story so well-layered that it is nearly impossible to provide an apt summary; those categorizing it as simply a neo-slave narrative merely “…describe it as it actually is…"\(^{69}\) without digging further to its primitive nature. Morrison’s works are known to be incredibly dense, but her narratives can still trace back to specific themes like freedom, womanhood, and friendships. Clutter, Morrison demonstrates, does not have to mean unclear, which is an idea Bachelard shares. *Poetics of Space* describes his perspective on adulthood distorting our sense of attachments to our surrounding objects. He writes:

> But our adult life is so dispossessed of the essential benefits, its anthropocosmic ties have become so slack, that we do not feel their first attachment in the universe of the house.\(^{70}\)

As briefly discussed in chapter 1.4, Bachelard illustrates how adulthood is so cluttered with excess that we lose sight of those essential, human bonds to objects. Excess in this sense does not necessarily suggest that people have too many possessions, as he also views cluttered rooms as important sites of study in an oneiric house. However, excess does have the ability to overwhelm one’s mind so that they are unable to see that “first attachment.”\(^{71}\) *Beloved* traces several threads of emptiness, in the body and in the home. The idea of excess in any capacity is largely absent save for the day-long party in 124’s yard. Baby Suggs’ abundant feast proves *too much* for her

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\(^{69}\) Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, page 4.

\(^{70}\) Ibid.

\(^{71}\) Ibid.
neighbors, who become angry in the aftermath. This illustrates one way in which excess can cause people to forget initial attachment, losing sight of essential relationships.

Now to take two buckets of blackberries and make ten, maybe twelve, pies; to have turkey enough for the whole town pretty near, new peas in September, fresh cream but no cow, ice and sugar... it made them mad. Loaves and fishes were His powers—they did not belong to an ex-slave who had probably never carried one hundred pounds to the scale... The scent of their disapproval lay heavy in the air... Her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess.\(^72\)

Excess pouring out of 124 cultivates its spite, which changes the home from its original form. Where the home prior to that day was an open space, welcoming to visitors, it now harbors a heaviness. Morrison’s play with interiors and exteriors appears not only through physical changes in 124’s form but also through metaphors. Like the strategy of personifying 124, metaphors can help bring different aspects of a story to life, allowing readers to become part of the story. Morrison does that once again by using the home as a vehicle.

In *Beloved*, Morrison uses the metaphor of entering a story to mirror how one might enter a house. She uses this metaphor to emphasize the idea that beautiful, as well as traumatic, experiences can inhabit our bodies for a long time. As Bachelard also suggests, homes often reflect the thoughts and memories we hold and by having readers enter her story, Morrison can more easily display her characters’ daydreams. In describing why she decided to begin the story *in medias res*, Morrison shares: “I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another... without preparation or defense.”\(^73\) Her

\(^{72}\) *Morrison, Beloved*, pages 161-163.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., page xii.
goal is to turn readers, in some sense, into her characters entering 124’s spite bathed in the not-angry-but-sad red encountered on the front cover. She also cleverly uses this metaphor to suggest that one can physically inhabit a story by recalling it. The act of telling a story becomes an experience into which one submerges. Morrison’s third person omniscient narrator hovers so closely to its characters that it can occupy many minds at once. Each time Denver recalls a story that her mother has told her, it reads as if through Sethe’s perspective. She manages to physically enter a memory that does not belong to her, but she inherits. When recalling stories of her mother’s past, Denver and the reader step hand-in-hand into the narrative, effectively mirroring Morrison’s overall project of tossing readers headfirst into the story. Here, the narrator describes Denver’s process of entering a story:

Easily [Denver] stepped into the told story that lay before her eyes on the path she followed away from the window. There was only one door to the house and to get to it from the back you had to walk all the way around to the front of 124, past the storeroom, past the cold house, the privy, the shed, on around to the porch… And to get to the part of the story she liked best, she had to start way back: hear the birds in the thick woods… see her mother making her way up into the hills where no houses were likely to be.74

Morrison uses several techniques to present a story as a space that can be entered and inhabited. Imagination shapes experience as Denver recalls a memory-story that is not hers but told to her so vividly that she is able to inhabit it herself. This method of employing metaphor to create structure is just one of the ways Morrison utilizes literary strategies to construct a home for readers and characters to lie in.

74 Morrison, Beloved, page 36.
Despite the reader spending the majority of the narration inside the house, we actually do not know much intimate information about the home. Readers know more about the ways in which the people residing interact with it and the emotions felt inside. The simple structural nature of the house is simultaneously less important and quite critical because it allows readers to better understand character motivations. One can also see narrative interior and exterior constructions through Morrison’s unusual plot strategy. Writers make use of interior and exterior plots to differentiate a thinking story from an active one. An interior narrative largely exists within a character’s mind and often features long monologues, slow pacing, and impressions of outside characters rather than interactions with them. In an exterior narration, there is an active, moving plot that does not closely describe a protagonist’s feelings and thoughts.

Given Morrison’s tendency to play with time, on first read Beloved appears to be an interior story. However, even in these frequent visitations with the past, the narrative does not always linger. Memories actually service the plot and provide important background on the present state of living. The nature of the narrator being so closely omniscient provides internal thoughts of several characters, however, we see these characters taking action. Sethe, while daydreaming, rinses off her legs, runs to the front of the house, encounters Paul D. Paul D beats out the ghost who later reappears as Beloved. Denver recalls past stories while doing chores to calm Beloved and hold her attention so that she does not leave the house, and so on. Because there are several moments of absolute still in a dense work, it is easy to forget that the narration rolls forward; even when gazing toward the past, it keeps moving. What makes this strategy so unusual is that this active, exterior plot is set in an interior space. The memories seem to take readers out of 124 but in reality, whether Denver or Sethe, the characters are still inside. Even Paul D’s reminiscence of his time after Sweet Home takes place as he is sitting on church steps.
It is also the interior setting that might trick readers into thinking Beloved is also a primarily interior plot. How much action could possibly occur inside one house? When it lives and emotes like 124, even moments of stasis contain a haunting wait signaling another change to the house.
1.7. Rememory and Bachelard’s Immemorial Domain

There is one area where memory plays a different set of roles for Bachelard. It is in what he calls the function of reality and unreality.

By the swiftness of its actions, the imagination separates us from the past as well as from reality; it faces the future. To the function of reality, wise in the experience of the past, as is defined by traditional psychology, should be added a function of unreality, which is equally positive, as I tried to show in certain of my earlier works. Any weakness in the function of unreality, will hamper the productive psyche. If we cannot imagine, we cannot foresee.75

The challenge is recognizing how to work with the real and the unreal to achieve poetic imagination, which Bachelard considers “… a major power of human nature.”76 Language, specifically poetry, becomes the tool through which Bachelard synchronizes the real and unreal. Poetic works allow for past, present and future to merge into a fluid spectrum of time. The poem, he argues, gives a certain dynamism to language because it interweaves the real and unreal.77

Similarly, Morrison uses language to collapse time and realities by positioning daydreams as places one can visit. While unconscious dreams have little-to-no presence in Beloved, characters are often seen daydreaming, which also brings them to the past. These characters are then forced to reckon with their traumatic histories through daydreams. Bachelard also reflects this position, that daydreams can tell us more than unconscious psychoanalysis. The images we conjure purposely, along with those that seem to appear out of nowhere, grasping us by the ankles and yanking back, might provide better insight into one's hopes or traumas. One may notice that these characters experience these daydreams, perhaps briefly ponder it, and

75 Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, page xxiv.
76 Ibid., page xxxiv.
77 Ibid., page xxxv.
move on. However, as previously discussed, it is important to name the thing that keeps appearing, whether invited or not. Within the first ten pages of the novel, we witness Sethe stepping into a daydream that seems to overload her senses and replace the world around her.

Unfortunately, her brain was devious... Nothing else would be in her mind... Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed toward water... and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too.78

As often occurs in situations involving trauma, one of the coping mechanisms used to deal with it involves the use of fantasy. Reconstructing one's present and/ or past is an often-necessary tactic to prevent from being consumed by it. In addition, Sethe, and the other inhabitants of Sweet Home were constantly reminded that their enslavement was better, gentler, because they were not beaten. When told that their enslaver was benevolent over a period of several years, they may have easily internalized that message, which after escaping, re-emerges in the form of daydreams. As Bachelard reminds readers: “And so, beyond all the positive values of protection, the house we were born in becomes imbued with dream values which remain after the house is gone.”79 Even after leaving Sweet Home for nearly two decades, it stays with all who were there and lived to escape. Sethe reiterates that though Sweet Home was a place of horrors, it is also the place where she, the Pauls, Halle, and Sixo grew together; it is where she birthed three of her children. So, despite it all, her memories and daydreams of Sweet Home manage to conceal nightmares in a cloud of nostalgia.

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78 Morrison, Beloved, pages 6–7.
79 Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, page 17.
Morrison shows us that Sethe, at any point, might return back to Sweet Home. Her mind could be completely empty, concentrated only on the task and hand, and Sweet Home will reveal itself out of nowhere. Sethe's location often triggers these memories. To better understand why this occurs, Bachelard summarizes this effect by stating that "here space is everything, for time ceases to quicken memory."\(^{80}\) Time proves unreliable for several reasons, namely because one cannot predict when these episodes will occur, however it is easier to tell where a character finds themselves as the memory takes hold. Bachelard writes: “Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days.”\(^{81}\) In this case, Sethe has no “treasure” to save of her time enslaved, so her mind begins to fabricate an improved site. The reader understands that this reimagining of Sweet Home comes as a result of trauma that occasionally finds one reconstructing the experience as something more beautiful than it was.

Another way of viewing this phenomenon of entering a memory is illustrated again by Sethe, who explains a concept central to the novel:

> I was talking about time… Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do… Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world… Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on… It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else.\(^{82}\)

Sethe's profound statement on rememory directly mirrors Bachelard's theory. She tells Denver that rememory occurs with memories one can never forget, to the point that they become present

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\(^{81}\) Ibid., page 5.
\(^{82}\) Morrison, *Beloved*, page 43.
in the real world. Some rememories are so powerful that they can even intrude another person's reality. In *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard states:

But we are very surprised, when we return to the old house, after an odyssey of many years, to find that the most delicate gestures… suddenly come alive, are still faultless. In short, the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting… The word habit is too worn a word to express this passionate liaison of our bodies, which do not forget, with an unforgettable house.  

Of course, Sethe does not, and cannot return to her old “home,” but she does find herself visiting it often.

Bachelard's central point on remembering the home does have a gaping flaw in its emphasis in nostalgia. This assumption that one's first place of living was a positive, sheltered home can be a dangerous way of thinking in the context of slavery. Such reasoning could be used to justify or excuse enslavement. So taken is Bachelard by the idea that childhood is defined by innocence, that he does not reframe his theory to accommodate those with varying backgrounds. One can find, however, that his own version of rememory holds true; visitations by way of daydreams construct a near-perfect home, devoid of physical flaws. Upon reflection in this memory-home, one more readily finds fault in the daydreamer rather than the place of dwelling. They wonder why their mind builds the site of trauma so beautifully, why they could not go back to change things, why they should have, why they would have. Again, this is where naming becomes critical to potential healing. Whether calling it a rememory or an example of

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Other examples of rememory exist throughout *Beloved*, though a scene featuring Denver also illustrates a rare moment of transformation. The women are starving in 124 and Denver is the only one who realizes it. Sethe, upon discovering that Beloved is indeed her crawling already? baby, gives all of herself in a combined act of guilt and joy to have her ghost child back in her arms. Denver then makes the decision to leave 124 for the first time in over a decade in order to find work so that they might eat again. “It came back. A dozen years had passed and the way came back. Four houses on the right, sitting close together in a line like wrens.” The motivation to walk past their porch comes from Denver's grandmother. Past conversations with Baby Suggs appear in Denver's mind, clear as day. Memory transitions into an imagined conversation as "Baby Suggs" advises Denver to take her first decisive steps into the yard toward town. This moment does slightly modify Sethe's original concept of rememory because there lacks a physical absence that is then filled by a past memory. Rather, Denver experiences a path which opens amidst overwhelming presence. Her newly-revealed path is reminiscent of Bachelard's statements on the stillness of memory. He says: “Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are. To localize a memory in time is merely a matter for the biographer…” We can perhaps determine that Denver has merely localized a memory through Baby Sugg's gentle prodding. Denver's recollection includes a town largely unchanged since she retreated back into 124. These secure memories mean that Denver

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84 “...the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives,” Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, page 8.
85 *Morrison, Beloved*, page 288.
simultaneously steps into her own immemorial domain and the present. By facing her past, she is then able to move forward.

In slight contrast, the women who arrive at 124 to pray the ghost out, encounter a more traditional rememory by coming in contact with their past selves.

When they caught up with each other, all thirty, and arrived at 124, the first thing they saw was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves. Younger, stronger, even as little girls lying in the grass asleep… there they were, young and happy, and playing in Baby Suggs’ yard, not feeling the envy that surfaced the next day.\(^{87}\)

Compared to Denver's moment of localization, the thirty women encounter rememory. Once in contact with the house they avoided, they are brought face-to-face with their imagined younger selves. 124 was not a formal dwelling space in the sense that Bachelard suggests, however, as Stamp Paid points out, doors are always open to kind neighbors.\(^{88}\) For these women, it is like stepping back into a former home and facing a collective rememory. Perhaps more interesting in this passage is the revelation that many of these women were in fact too young to feel the weight of the original spite. They only knew to avoid 124 and Sethe by way of generational memories. Not only can memory act as a site of entrance, it also has the ability to drive action.

Stamp Paid's touching memory of Baby Suggs leads him toward 124 in an attempt to reach out a hand in service to Sethe and Denver. While Baby Suggs does not speak directly to him as she does Denver, prior conversations help motivate his actions.

Deeper and more painful than his belated concern for Denver or Sethe, scorching his soul like a silver dollar in a fool's pocket, was the memory of Baby Suggs—the mountain to his sky. It was the

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\(^{87}\) Morrison, Beloved, page 304.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., pages 203 and 220.
memory of her and the honor that was her due that made him walk straight-necked into the yard of 124…

This demonstrates an example of memory driving one's action. Stamp Paid, like the rest of town, is too proud to go near the house. Though, in contrast with them, Stamp Paid is also marked by pain and sorrow over Baby Suggs' passing coupled with Sethe's arrogant isolation. His memory of Baby Suggs, however, takes him back to 124, perhaps also catalyzed by Beloved's presence. Remarkably, Stamp Paid does not need to enter the house to be affected by it and the memories stored inside. Like the thirty women who spent significant time there, treating it like another home, he only needs to be in proximity to become implicated in it. Coming in contact with 124 resurrected his most salient memories like they only transpired days before; such is the outcome of walking into such a potent immemorial domain.

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89 Ibid., page 201.
1.8. Fixations of Happiness in Homes and Gardens

Although Bachelard emphasized that dreams bind prior, present, and future dwellings and experiences together, in reality, one’s various dwelling places are more complex because they are reservoirs containing both pleasant and traumatic memories. He writes:

Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all immemorial things are. We live fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, but recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams…

Bachelard suggests that daydreamers, when encountering memories in a new home, enter a Motionless Childhood stage. In this stage, daydreams relive past memories from other dwellings while also understanding that there must be a method of containment to preserve these images. This, compared to earlier concepts on the home, allows for better inclusion without assuming an innocent childhood. As a relatively common method of coping, all the characters have a way to live their own fixations of happiness while attempting to close other aspects of their pasts. Paul D does this most obviously with the tin in his chest. Before divulging too much information about his past to Sethe, the narrator shares:

Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He would not pry it loose now in font of this sweet sturdy woman.

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91 Morrison, *Beloved*, page 86.
As the novel progresses, one finds that this tobacco tin explodes wide open as he is forced to confront a past that had him “…hidden in caves… buried in slop…and wells to avoid regulators, raiders, patrollers, veterans, hill men, posses and merrymakers.”\(^{92}\) Paul D transports to a period in his life that Bachelard might call the intimately immense. He defines this state as the place one transports to while daydreaming; typically this daydream is one of grandeur.\(^ {93}\) Bachelard, in fact, draws from spaces featuring immense quiet to define immensity though, as with his other theoretical findings, defines terms under the assumption of a positive past.

Because the forest rustles, the ‘curdled’ quiet trembles and shudders, it comes to life with countless lives. But these sounds and these movements do not disturb the silence and quietude of the forest.\(^ {94}\)

Bachelard uses the example of forests to help readers understand how immensity functions because, despite the constant sounds of surrounding nature in any wooded area, it also contains an immense silence. He implies immensity as a tranquil space similar to the attic giving one space to daydream despite surrounding noise. When writing, Bachelard did not name the forest as an example because his readers would have deep, personal attachments to the environment. Those enslaved, however, have a complex relationship with forests, crossing figurative and literal definitions. Consider a case such as Paul D’s years-long journey back north. Paul D faces literal immense quiet while moving through the woods, attempting to avoid capture. For him, he must face years of this quiet that incites fear and anxiety, yet comfort in concealment, rather than tranquil daydreaming.\(^ {95}\) This also deeply affects how Paul D and other

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\(^ {92}\) Morrison, *Beloved*, page 78.
\(^ {93}\) Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, page 183.
\(^ {94}\) Ibid., page 187.
\(^ {95}\) “Alone, undisguised, with visible skin, memorable hair and no whiteman to protect him, he never stayed uncaught … In all those escapes he could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his. He hid inits breast, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it (317).”
escaping slaves experience intimate immensity. As long as his tobacco tin is sealed shut, Paul D can revisit this period of escape without dwelling on feelings of fear and dread, shifting closer to the Motionless Childhood. Again, Morrison uses a fictional character to describe a phenomenon rooted in reality. Other slaves throughout history who used the woods for escape often revisit their past thinking of those who aided in escape, as well as relief in safely hiding from slave patrols.96

Forests were not the only spaces allowing slaves to experience something close to freedom, as there was a strong relationship between enslaved people and the environment. Environmental and African-American historical scholar Dianne Glave along with environmental scholar Mark Stoll elaborate on these relationships in a short anthology. Titled To Love the Wind and the Rain, the work draws connections between architecture, Black-American history, and environmentalism. Scholar Mart A. Stewart contributes a chapter on “Slavery and the Origins of African American Environmentalism” which offers a brief historiography of slavery through the lens of the surrounding environment. Typically, essays related to the American slave era centers on interpersonal relationships between enslaved people, between the enslaved and enslaver, or internalized relationships with the self. This essay, however, shifts the gaze toward a connection between the enslaved and the ground on which they labored. Beloved’s narrative voice often positions Sweet Home as a gentler form of slavery because there were no rice or tobacco fields in sight.97 However, it is still necessary to remember that the men worked in the fields as slaves without even a garden plot to their name.

97 Morrison, Beloved, page 164.
Stewart provides background on the conditions that catalyzed the mass expansion of slave labor in the south with the invention of the cotton gin. He then moves to speak more specifically about gardens.

Many slaves translated this keen awareness and precise knowledge of the environment into a landscape of subsistence and small profit. They commonly planted small gardens near their cabins… or even in “bottom places” in the swamps or woods surrounding the plantations… The environment off the plantation was often as important to slave communities as were the fields, quarters, and garden patches on the plantation.  

This passage illustrates some of the ways in which enslaved people attempted to retain some sense of autonomy while on plantations. Stewart takes it a step further by introducing some of the methods of resistance that enslaved people used to mitigate power from their enslavers. Some primary weapons of resistance were herbs and local plants. They used grown plants for medicinal purposes, to create goods like baskets, and household items. For those enslaved, Stewart argues, “the uncultivated landscape where slaves gathered plants… was, for them, alive with spirit and spiritual meaning.”

While Beloved’s narrative is not centered on garden spaces, they do play a central role during several key moments in the novel; namely, in the scenes prior to the sheriff and Schoolteacher arriving to 124. Baby Suggs senses an ominous cloud wafting toward them.

Nothing seemed amiss—yet the smell of disapproval was sharp. Back beyond the vegetable garden, closer to the stream but in full sun, she had planted corn… Baby Suggs leaned back into the peppers and the squash vines with her hoe. Carefully, with the blade at just the right angle, she cut through a stalk of insistent rue. Its

99 Ibid., page 14.
100 Ibid., page 15.
flowers she stuck through a split in her hat; the rest she tossed aside... Resting on the handle of the hoe, she concentrated. She was accustomed to the knowledge that nobody prayed for her—but this free-floating repulsion was new.¹⁰¹

This scene slows the reader down to a near halt, building anticipation and fear, mirroring Baby Suggs’ feeling at the time. In the space where life is blooming and food being replenished, it transforms, becoming a site of trauma. Stamp Paid claims he started it, the series of events that would end with he and Baby Suggs looking toward the water while Sethe ran to the shed with a handsaw.¹⁰² By venturing to a hidden place only he knew, getting cut up by thorns and stung by insects just to pick two buckets of blackberries for Denver, he inspired Baby Suggs to begin cooking up a feast “… worthy of the man’s labor and his love. That’s how it began.”¹⁰³ Years later, the garden is barren save for some wildflower growing instead of vegetables.¹⁰⁴ Telling the reader names of what grows serves not only to depict Paul D’s knowledge of plants¹⁰⁵ as a result of his enslavement and subsequent years trekking toward Ohio, nor just a literary device to slow the scene, it also calls to ways in which gardens are described in other texts related to slavery. Glave contributes an essay in *To Love the Wind and the Rain* on gardens created post-slavery, using similar descriptive language to specify the plants used.

Most women grew vegetable gardens primarily to sustain their families. They planted okra, milo, eggplant collards, watermelon, white yam... African Americans also displayed flowers... beckoning neighbors to take a closer look or visitors to chat in the yard’s fragrance and color. The women looked out upon exquisite

¹⁰¹ *Morrison, Beloved, pages 162- 163.*
¹⁰² Ibid., page 159.
¹⁰³ Ibid., page 160.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., page 318.
¹⁰⁵ “First he stands in the back, near the cold house, amazed by the riot of late-summer flowers where vegetables should be growing. Weet William, morning glory, chrysanthemums... the blossoms shriveled like sores (318).”
flowers including petunias, buttercups, verbenas, day lilies, cannas, chrysanthemums…

This method of naming appears in several other texts discussing enslavement as well as interviews by descendants of slaves. Despite these descriptions sounding chaotic in the sheer scope of plants existing in these smaller garden spaces, there is still a distinct orderliness in the way these exact plants are listed, further suggesting that perceived clutter does not necessarily indicate an unclear space. In contrast, spaces both external and internal that seem well organized can often retain a well of disordered memories, as evidenced by Paul D.

Where Paul D has a “physical” object containing his traumatic memories, Sethe just stores them in a corner of her mind. “…All her effort was directed not on avoiding pain but on getting through it as quickly as possible.” These memories, a loosely-bound stack of papers, occasionally find themselves shuffled about the room. Paul D’s initial visit brought parts of her past to the forefront, but he was, at the very least, someone who could share that trauma. But, when factoring in Beloved, daydreams and memories bubble then burst, leaving searing images in their wake. As she, Denver, and Beloved sit by the fireplace in 124, Beloved asking questions as usual, one in particular strikes a chord with Sethe.

She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew.

Beloved acts as memory-bringer throughout the course of this novel by instigating each character’s resurfacing of memories and revelations that they hoped to keep locked up. She does this, in part, because that is the role of a visitor in a novel; they expose the fragile shards in their

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106 Glave and Stoll, To Love the Wind and the Rain, page 40.
107 Ibid., page 46.
108 Ibid., page 73.
new surroundings. Beloved's role becomes more interesting when reading her through *Poetics of Space*. Using Bachelard's topoanalysis to study the localization of memories, one can understand Beloved as an embodiment of the house. Beloved and 124 are inseparable entities, even as the spirit-house manifests itself in a physical, mobile form. Beloved as home is then able to shed light on these “…nooks and corridors [where] our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated.”\(^{109}\) By simply asking: “‘Your woman, she never fix up your hair?’”\(^{110}\) Beloved manages to throw open a chest of memories hidden so deeply, that they even eluded the daydreamer, Sethe. By Denver's accounts, Sethe typically repeats the same stories over and over, frequently stopping when Denver begins to inquire too deeply. “[Sethe] and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe gave short replies or ambling incomplete reveries… the hurt was always there— like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left.”\(^{111}\) Although the traumatic events in her life are a constant presence in her life, Sethe clearly fixatives on those things that bring her joy or pride, lest she find herself crying over a stove once again.

Sethe's fixations also stress the present. Every aspect of her past brings a pain she would rather not revisit. To worry about the future might also require challenging the past. The present, however, allows her to face exactly what is in front of her and nothing more. Unfortunately, the present also runs the risk of seeing parts of the past and potential futures flash before her. As Paul D tells her the fate of her husband and appears compelled to share more, Sethe recognizes her emotional limit. Instead of telling Paul D this, she thinks:

\(^{111}\) Ibid., page 69.
…Then there is still more that Paul D could tell me and my brain would go right ahead and take it and never say, No thank you. I don't want to know or have to remember that, I have other things to do: worry, for example, about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved… But [Sethe's] brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day.112

Imagination here fuels memory by surfacing image of Halle that she would not have even conceived. Her mental and physical house has gotten too crowded to effectively store memories. Rather, it has emptied so much that there are no longer available reservoirs for these memories to lay in. Paul D has just told her that he saw a traumatized Halle with butter smeared across his face the night of Sethe's assault. Sethe finds out that her husband witnessed said assault and did nothing, unable to move from the loft due to his own trauma, that Paul D could not speak to Halle because he had a bit in his mouth. She did not ask to discover these details, and now she knows that they will never leave her crowded mind. Paul D, who cleared the house, now fills it with more history, making the air thick, difficult to breathe in.

A topoanalyst studying a space is likely to ask qualitative questions about the space in order to gauge the state of one's daydreams and imagination. They might ask: “was the room a large one? Was the garret cluttered up? …How, too, in these fragments of space, did the human being achieve silence.”113 These questions are targeted toward the spaces of solitude in which one daydreams. For Bachelard, daydreams can in fact reveal more than dreams, contrary to what psychoanalysis might suggest. Therefore, studying those secluded spaces can prove critical. Prior to Paul D's arrival, Sethe sites the keeping room as her place of solitude to daydream. This room, where Sethe does not pray, but talk-thinks, allows her to debrief and re-articulate some of

112 Morrison, Beloved, page 83.
her present stresses, but more importantly, to safely delve into her past. It is the same room that Baby Suggs slept in, died in. There was comfort in knowing that her mother-in-law's possible presence could support her, but Paul D disrupted that peace when he threw out the haunting spirit and invited all the noise of the past inside. The very morning after her first night sharing a bed with Paul D, the quiet of the keeping room dissolved.

Kneeling in the keeping room where she usually went to talk-think it was clear why Baby Suggs was so starved for color. There wasn't any except for two orange quakes in a quilt that made the absence shout.¹¹⁴

When even barren space begins to scream, it is clear then that Sethe's area of solitude has ceased to exist. Without a place to store memories and reflect on them, Sethe's daydreams become more real. She can enter memory-stories and truly seem like she is a witness; as if she is standing beside a paralyzed Halle, skin gleaming with fresh butter. The keeping room holds personal significance for several characters in Beloved, not only as a site of solitude, but also as a place of rebirth. It contains features that align with Bachelard's conception of the Original House. While the keeping room is merely a room in 124, it is useful to read it as such, showing how a space can transform for those who inhabit it.

¹¹⁴ Morrison, Beloved, page 46.
1.9. The Keeping Room as an Original House

The ideal Oneiric Home, according to Bachelard, is built no higher than four stories tall. He explains the home’s basic structure, writing:

If I were the architect of an oneiric house, I should hesitate between a three-story house and one with four. A three-story house, which is the simplest as regards essential height, has a cellar, a ground floor and an attic; while a four-story house puts a floor between the ground floor and the attic. One floor more, and our dreams become blurred. In the oneiric house, topoanalysis only knows how to count to three or four. 115

Noting that 124 is only two stories tall, there is only the ground floor and a floor above. If Bachelard claims that a structure taller than four stories blurs one’s dreams, perhaps one that is one or two stories condenses dreams. The darkness a cellar should contain leaks into the ground floor; there is no place for Sethe to stash away those haunting daydreams. So, according to Bachelard’s logic, the space can still function oneirically, however, one’s dreams become muddled. In that space, it is difficult to differentiate the positive experiences from negative ones, but perhaps this is where the unreal is useful. He writes that “… An immense cosmic house is a potential of every dream of houses.” 116 Which alludes to the oneiric house taking on grander qualities, expanding without constructing new walls. A persistent ghost might have the power to do that, so 124 becomes an endless space more capable of containing its inhabitants’ dreams. Though its two-story structure disadvantages 124, the possibility of expansion helps separate Sethe and Denver’s daydreams.

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116 Ibid., page 51.
Moving to the interior space, *The Poetics of Space* reveals a phenomenological project invested in isolating one's “Original House.” He writes: “In every dwelling… the first task of the phenomenologist is to find the original shell.”\(^{117}\) What he means, is to isolate the original space housing our most intimate, cherished memories that accompany us no matter where we later reside. Our Original House, he says, “... is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word.”\(^{118}\) Bachelard refers to this symbolic house using interchangeable phrasing such as the oneiric house and house we are born in. This place is the embodiment of dreams, where one's mind gleefully returns in another place of dwelling. Within the context of *Beloved*, a similar concept of this Original House exists. However, it is necessary to re-evaluate Bachelard's notion to suit this slave narrative. Some of the vital supporting features of the Original House cannot be easily applied to those oppressed and marginalized. It is important to acknowledge the aspects of classic theory— presumably applicable to all situations and peoples— assuming everyone experiences life in similar ways.

Bachelard writes that the conception of daydreams sourced to an Original House indicates “…a sort of remorse at not having lived profoundly enough in the old house…”\(^{119}\) due to the frequency and intensity of daydreams situated in the past coupled with a more active imagination. As one might imagine, such is not the case for one born into slavery. Sethe herself is unsure if she was raised in South Carolina or Louisiana; she was birthed at sea, the only child that her mother did not cast overboard. Her childhood is made up of loose fragments containing singing, shadows, a cloth hat, and crowds of bodies both living and dead. Certainly, this is not

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118 Ibid., page 4.
119 Ibid., page 56.
the vision of idyllic, innocent childhood Bachelard had in mind. How, then, does one reconcile this dilemma and where would the Original House appear in a work like *Beloved*?

Morrison's closely omniscient narrator first introduces 124's keeping room—Baby Sugg's room— with the presence of a ghost. Denver, upon approaching 124 after spending time in her secret hideaway, peers into the window and saw “…that a white dress knelt down next to her mother and had its sleeve around her mother's waist.” She assumes this to be the baby's ghost in a rare, gentle encounter with Sethe. Every other occurrence featuring the crawling already? ghost bears spite, sorrow, and rage throughout the house; but in this one room, the ghost appears draped in white, holding her mother while she speaks with God.

One of the key features in an onieric house, according to Bachelard, relates to levels of secrecy. He suggests:

> The first, the oneirically definitive house, must retain its shadows. For it belongs to the literature of depth… All we communicate to others is an orientation towards what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively.

Readers observe such an instance when Denver informs her mother about the white dress kneeling beside her. It is during this moment that Sethe reveals her toughs on rememory. While she manages to articulate these thoughts to Denver, there is still a lingering impression that she does not quite understand. There will always be a certain amount of distance because Denver lacks a similar experience. Knowing this, Sethe can only direct her toward this painful history at Sweet Home and why Denver could never go back. This conversation takes place far before Paul

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120 Morrison, *Beloved*, page 35.
D’s arrival, which indicates the keeping room is still capable of holding such secrets. The morning after his initial visit, Sethe becomes aware of its overwhelming emptiness and feels she must avoid it. This is an important development that also pints to the keeping room’s transformation. Bachelard’s work does not point to a specific example directly paralleling Sethe’s avoidance, however, he does write that the successive homes we live in may undergo a transformation, much like Sethe’s rememory concept. The room transforming from this place of solitude into a room too-empty suggests two things. First, it reinforces the qualities of an oneiric house by changing due to a greater presence of history. Sethe may not have described the keeping room as bare if she had not linked the space with Baby Suggs, who originally inhabited the space. And since Baby Suggs’ died, Sethe managed to make it her own, unconsciously changing the space herself. This is where the transformation into a space of solitude takes place. Not to say the two are mutually exclusive, merely different iterations of a space. So, when the room appears to change into a barren state in Sethe’s eyes, it is really changing back to the state it was prior to Baby Suggs’ passing

When Sethe first came to 124, after delivering a child just hours before and unsure of her own life lasting, she enters the keeping room as the place in which Baby Suggs lived. In it, Sethe experiences a rebirth, marking a true sense of freedom.

Baby Suggs led Sethe to the keeping room and, by the light of a spirit lamp, bathed her in sections, starting with her face. Then, while waiting for another pan of heated water, she sat next to her and stitched gray cotton… After each bathing, Baby covered her with a quilt and put another pan on in the kitchen… By dawn the silent baby woke and took her mother’s milk.  

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Finally able to nurse her babies and hold her sons without fear of Schoolteacher’s threats, Sethe has a renewed sense of hope in a future existing for her. “Sethe had twenty-eight days… of unsaved life… All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and decide what to do with the day.” The keeping room then becomes a true first home for Sethe, even as she occupies other rooms in 124, that is where she ultimately understands how a home feels. Here, she receives meticulous care from her mother-in-law, which follows Bachelard’s understanding of an idyllic childhood. Because of this, Sethe would always be intimately tied to the keeping room. Baby Suggs spent the last months of her life “…in the keeping room bed roused once in a while by a craving for color and not for any other thing.” Her physical ties to the room weakened, but as Sethe suggests, it would still be possible to encounter her rememory.

The keeping room acts as an entry point into—and out of—124. In part because of its location on the first floor, but there is also a draw toward the space so full of memory that one does not notice its emptiness. Beloved first enters 124 extremely weak, barely able to lift her head, and immediately taken Baby Suggs’ bed in the keeping room. There, Denver tends to her like a mother until Beloved recovers to full health. Beloved refers to the room as “heavy,” perhaps also because she can sense the weight of memories stored there, one of which belongs to her. If we presume Beloved to be the crawling already? baby, her last moments were spent in the keeping room.

Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go. Baby Suggs shook her head. ‘One at a time,’ she said and traded the living for the dead, which she carried into the keeping room.

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123 Morrison, Beloved, page 111.
124 Ibid., page 104.
125 Ibid., page 64.
126 Ibid., page 179.
This room is where Sethe first nursed Beloved, where Baby Suggs laid down her corpse, where Denver—who “…took her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister”\textsuperscript{127}—revived her, where Sethe nurses her as the thirty women stand outside.

When the women assembled outside 124, Sethe was breaking a lump of ice into chunks…When the music entered the window she was writing a cool cloth to put on Beloved’s forehead. Beloved, sweating profusely, was sprawled on the bed in the keeping room.\textsuperscript{128}

Beloved once again finds herself living her last moments in the keeping room, making it that much heavier with rememory. Though Bachelard does not mention it, one’s original house might also be what comes to the daydreamer’s mind as they near death. Paul D, upon returning to 124 confronts Sethe as she lies expressionless in Baby Suggs’ bed.\textsuperscript{129} As the room progresses from crowded, to barren, to having “…too much light…”\textsuperscript{130} it reflects the shape and weight memories have. Had Sethe viewed the keeping room as an original house, might she have better reconciled the past made too visible? Would recognizing her traumas shifting into different forms allow for accelerated healing. As Bachelard suggests, the home reflects one’s state of daydreams. With the proper tools, Sethe might have been able to see that she is her own best thing. One can easily clean a home made dirty; however, it takes time and energy to reorganize a mess left to build and spread.

\textsuperscript{127} Morrison, Beloved, page 179.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., page 307.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., pages 319-320.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., page 319.
1.10. Loving Too Thick? Self-Reclamation and Preservation

In the face of trauma, the body has methods in place to ensure that it does not fall apart. This may come in the form of memory loss, escapism, silence, and avoidance.\textsuperscript{131} Paul D, for example, can only find quiet after the body has finished trembling.\textsuperscript{132} An ideal outcome after undergoing treatments or sessions designed to aid in easing one’s trauma, is having a reclaimed sense of self. Often inspired by a sense of pride in achieving active, healthy preservation, self-reclamation is a state wherein the victim no longer feels like a docile body. Through \textit{Beloved}, Morrison presents a number of forms that trauma can take, as well as differing coping mechanisms and visions of healing. The realities of living through and understanding one’s trauma can be approached using a variety of literary strategies, any of which should ultimately reveal something about the nature of that trauma. One method of exploring trauma recalls a strategy discussed in chapter one by making use of interior and exterior plots. That is, how a story navigates a character’s mental space versus the story’s plotted action.

Like the first person, third person omniscient narratives are typically associated with internal dialogues coming from a narrator recounting events through a reflective lens. Morrison turns this trope on its head by presenting a story that does not appear to be meditating on the past from the distant future. This narrator, save for the epilogue chapter, remains concerned with the present while adding each character’s history into the fold. This immediately brings to light a tension between memory and truth. Though this strain is present in any story, the urgency of a novel involving traumatic events tends to elevate the stakes of storytelling. If one cannot trust the exterior events of a novel, nor the interior recollection, how can one trust that the trauma exists

\textsuperscript{131} “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” National Institute of Mental Health.
\textsuperscript{132} Morrison, \textit{Beloved}, page 125.
in the first place? And there lies—arguably—the biggest risk in using exteriors and interiors to present trauma: the moment a reader stops believing the trauma exists, the story falls apart. In a neo-slave narrative, there is no way to hold disbelief in the trauma of enslavement; the surrounding haunting, however, leaves room for question. Narrators can be mistrusted and should be, as memory can be fickle, but it is the spatial strategies authors use to frame trauma that keep readers grounded. By understanding how characters preserve their sanity, readers can also remain fully integrated in the story.

Plot localities in works like Beloved are utilized in several ways to better understand high stakes traumas. Sethe, for example, primarily depends on recounting exterior events to shape the trauma of killing her daughter and the subsequent isolation from the rest of town. The largeness of this traumatic event competes with the amount and pacing of action simultaneously occurring in the novel. There appeared to be a lot of action happening in the fictive present. Paul D, then Beloved’s arrival are two great events compared to the life Sethe and Denver had been living prior to that point. However, Morrison plays with pacing to accelerate or pause time, which results in stacking all that happens one after another with brief moments of reprieve. In reality, the novel takes place over the course of several months with a relatively ordered routine. Aside from conflict between Paul D and Sethe about Beloved, about the woodshed, majority of the novel deals with internal conflicts. Rather than serving as a distraction, the novel’s uniquely paced exterior and action helps readers understand how the characters process the very thing that haunts them. When Sethe discusses any of the issues continually stored in the back of her mind, she must talk around it. She uses this avoidance technique was a way to preserve the thin barrier keeping her sanity together.
‘Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he’d see the drops of it on the front of my res. Nothing I could do about that… After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk… Held me down and took it… Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.’

Sethe recounts her trauma of assault by Schoolteacher’s nephews. Pregnant with Denver and breasts full of food for the child she sent on to Cincinnati, these two boys violate her then beat her until her back blooms with torn skin and tissue. By "taking her milk," they disrupt a process meant to nourish a body and preserve its life, in favor of theft. Such is a familiar tale with many iterations. The way Sethe explains this act may strike readers at first as odd because she uses a passive voice to describe what occurred. Sethe dissociated herself from her body by referring to her milk as the stolen thing. Her trauma prevents her from voicing their acts, which is further emphasized in a subsequent exchange with Paul D.

‘They used cowhide on you?’

‘And they took my milk.’

‘They beat you and you was pregnant?’

‘And they took my milk!’

Perhaps in an effort to maintain her own sense of self, she recenters the focus on her crawling already? baby. Rather than say the boys took something from her, the narrator shifts to say that they took something important from the baby: her life sustaining milk. “Nobody had her milk but me,” she tells Paul D. Readers must also consider the context of wider slave histories which saw many slave women nursing children— usually not their own— on plantations. This is

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133 Morrison, Beloved, pages 19- 20.
134 Ibid., page 20.
135 Ibid., page 19.
Sethe’s own history, as she barely knows what her own mother looked like. An important aspect of reclaiming one’s body and self includes the ability to nurse one’s own children; but how can Sethe do such a thing when her milk has been tainted then stolen? The “rebirth” in 124 is a critical part of Sethe’s reclamation. Only after being thoroughly cleansed by Baby Suggs’ hands could Sethe nurse her babies.

Among Morrison’s strengths is depicting varying powers and perspectives from Black women. Sethe, Baby, Suggs, Denver, and Beloved are not simplified characters onto whom one can place the labels “sassy” or “strong.” These are women with pains so cavernous and hearts brimming so full that unfamiliar readers could not possibly reduce them to single-word adjectives. As is the case with other Black women writers, Morrison depicts well-rounded Black characters without bias. Documenting the complex, continuing history of Black femininity has been largely overlooked in academic spaces, which is, in many ways, reflected in the perpetual mistreatment and misunderstanding of Black feminine identities in the social sphere. One of the few areas where Black feminine identity is treated as a relevant intersection is fictional literature. Even feminist studies rely on fiction, as one cannot do critical discourse analysis of Black feminist theory without also analyzing fiction writers. The theoretical and imaginary are inextricably linked, as evidenced by Morrison’s position as a writer employing Black feminist ideologies in her works. *Beloved,* functions as a two-fold study on womanhood and slave narratives. Scholars studying women’s slave narratives typically focus on Mary Prince,— being the first woman’s slave narrative emerging form the Americas— Harriet Ann Jacobs’ *Incidents*

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in the Life of a Slave Girl, and Ellen Craft’s role in her husband’s narrative: Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom. The relative absence of analysis on these works sends a devalued message toward these narratives and minimized Black women’s roles in that era by suggesting that beyond transcription, their voices serve little use.

There are a number of possibilities contributing to the scarcity in studies on women’s slavery accounts, primarily surrounding the systematic erasure of Black women in mainstream historical accounts. One issue that arises in crafting these works based on historical events is an understandable reluctance to relay these personal, traumatic histories. Margaret Garner, for example, spoke very little about her family’s escape and subsequent capture leading to the standoff in her brother-in-law’s home. Nikki M. Taylor addresses the potential problem with narrative gaps, writing:

…How can historians recover the history of trauma, verify it, or qualify its intensity when the testimony about it is often fragmented, unspoken, or told through the words and filters of others? Garner’s inability to fully and directly reveal her personal trauma in her own words does not mean it did not occur… In order to understand trauma, historians must learn to read ‘what is said silently.’\(^\text{137}\)

Morrison dedicated significant time pouring over research to capture the period, geography, and language. Sethe’s character, the role her personality and physicality play in the novel, reads more personally, coming from more intimate knowledge of how Black femme bodies are read and subsequently treated. The treatment of Black women in academic and social spheres ultimately stem from the intentioned of the prototypical Black femme body in the eighteenth century. Kaila

\(^{137}\) Taylor, Driven Toward Madness, page 80.
Aida Story details the process leading to the classification for Black women’s bodies by scientists at the time:

…European naturalists and anatomists deemed European women’s bodies dangerous and suspicious due to the fact that they had anatomy unlike males; African bodies were hypersexual and ultimately nonhuman because of their polarization to whiteness.\textsuperscript{138}

It was determined that, because of their apparent proximity to apes and social connotations of the color black to signify uncleanliness or impurity, Black people were inherently inferior to white Europeans. Shortly after:

…Institutions of enslavement and colonization advanced the conclusion that Africans were inferior ideologically as well physically… Enslavement as an institution visually and aesthetically altered the African body, leaving its corporeal value open to interpretation and perception.\textsuperscript{139}

The woman’s body later turned to that of a spectacle wherein any action performed by a Black woman became emblematic of all Black women. This meant that the body also became a canvas onto which white Europeans could project immorality and inhumanity.\textsuperscript{140} Black femme bodies were transformed into material objects, representing excess, a corporeal representation of a cardinal sin. Paul D, in fact, verbalizes this when he says that her “love is too thick”\textsuperscript{142} in response to her explanation for her actions the day Schoolteacher came to 124. He follows with a judgement on her humanity: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four…”\textsuperscript{143} Over the course of one conversation, Sethe, the prized Sweet Home woman, becomes a beast with love dripping viscous

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., page 38.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., page 40.
\textsuperscript{141} Too sexual, too immoral, too voluptuous, too loud.
\textsuperscript{142} Morrison, Beloved, page 193.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., page 194.
down her four legs. This is not a new phenomenon, nor one relegated to the past, for how often have Black women and femmes opened their hearts only to face claims that they are “too much?”

This trope has been used in texts both fiction and nonfiction across generations to present women—particularly women of color—as variations of mad, sick, strange, or out of their mind. How this trope is executed and what it represents can radically differ depending on the person writing. Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Suzanne Bost both point to the ways in which illness has served women of color as a mode of community building. Ogunyemi in her analysis of womanism through a literary lens addresses the trope of the mad black woman. Though typically seen in a negative light as a way to reinforce stereotypes, Ogunyemi shifts this mode of thinking to present an alternative result of this trope when written by other black women. She makes clear that this can only be true in characters written by black women authors due to rampant misogynoir in media. Often, when men use the mad black woman, it is more often used to evidence the lack of humanity that black women have. She writes:

…The black madwoman in novels written by black women knows in her subconscious that she must survive because she has people without other resources depending on her; in a positive about-face she usually recovers through a superhuman effort... After each mental upheaval there is thus a stasis in the womanist novel when the black woman’s communion with the rest of society is established... Madness becomes a temporary aberration preceding spiritual growth, healing, and integration.144

Part of what makes this analysis of madness so puzzling in the context of Beloved, is that the reader does not necessarily get that resolution in which the mad woman finds healing in her community. Denver manages to reconcile her past with neighbors, however she still expresses

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concern for her mother’s wellbeing. One can interpret the novel’s end to imply Sethe’s eventual wellness, but Morrison leaves it ambiguous, perhaps to encourage readers to deeply consider the effects of trauma on the body. Suzanne Bost’s work *Encarnacion* centers on illness as represented in Chicana feminist literature, however, her anecdote on a new reading of bodily failures applies to Sethe’s state as well.

Pain, illness, and disability are assumed to represent corporeal failure because they challenge our standards of how bodies should work, look, and feel. Yet these very same qualities usually assumed to be negative also have positive… implications… [it] links individuals with others… and forces us to think about how we interpret bodies and sensations… The bodies of the sick cannot be mistaken as static, essential, or seamless; rather, they bear the marks of history…

Sethe is a rather literal example of bearing marks of history and a body that never stays still. Even in the novel’s pronounced moments of stasis, readers might notice that Sethe is never completely still, even when asleep, her mind is at work. Sethe’s ever-active character does force readers to reconsider the function of illness or madness in the body. As she grows weak from lack of nutrition, Sethe still attempts to explain her prior actions to Beloved; it is this state of weakness that provokes her neighbors to arrive in the yard. How one views the body has almost always doubled as insight into one’s personality. Such practices were common under slavery during slave auctions. Nikki Taylor writes describing one way that the body becomes a text on which enslavers encoded language to reach certain conclusions.

The reading of scars as evidence of a slave’s personal history is not unusual. After all, slave traders and buyers considered scars evidence of slaves’ histories of rebelliousness or disobedience. Potential buyers ‘read’ the number of and severity of the wounds and scars as a measure of how unruly the person has been in [their]

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past. They subsequently manufactured histories for the people who stood before them that seemed to, in their minds, correspond with the scars.\textsuperscript{146}

One character directly impacts Sethe’s body, contrasting Paul D’s vocal bodily reading, quiet support and quieter exit. Beloved is an elusive character, seemingly remaining in her crawling-already? stage as the reader, even over a hundred pages, knows so little about her. Valerie Smith makes an apt observation relating Beloved to the narrative. She writes:

\begin{quote}
The figure of Beloved herself most obviously calls into question the relationship between narrative and the body. As a ghost made flesh, she is literally the story of the past embodied. Sethe and Denver and Paul D therefore encounter not only the story of her sorrow and theirs; indeed, they encounter its incarnation. Beloved’s presence allows the generally reticent Sethe to tell stores from their past. Once Sethe realizes that the stranger called Beloved and her Baby Beloved are one and the same, she gives herself over fully to the past, and to Beloved’s demand for comfort and curing. Indeed, so compete are her attempts to make things right with Beloved that she is almost consumed by her.\textsuperscript{147}
\end{quote}

Her physical manifestation does more than disrupt the narrative present—as Paul D does—it makes substantial and tangible shifts across the entire town. As a mythic figure, Beloved does not need to directly interact with people to affect them, as evidenced by Stamp Paid or Ella. However, the subject of her needs, Sethe, endures the greatest disruption from this visitation. Beloved’s arrival signals change in every aspect of Sethe’s life; many of her physical changes occur suddenly or violently, such as the unexpected arrival of Beloved on the stump in front of 124.

And, for some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe’s bladder filled to capacity. She said, ‘Oh, excuse me,’ and ran around to the back

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\textsuperscript{146} Taylor, \textit{Driven Toward Madness}, page 81.
\textsuperscript{147} Valerie Smith, “‘Circling the Subject’: History and Narrative in \textit{Beloved}” from \textit{Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present}, page 350.
\end{flushright}
of 124… She never made the outhouse. Right in front of its door she had to lift her skirts, and the water she voided was endless… But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now.\textsuperscript{148}

As Beloved arrives, Sethe’s water metaphorically breaks; one can see how the body transforms as it comes in contact with a haunting past. Immediately upon arriving inside, Beloved guzzles water; Sethe pours forth while Beloved takes in. When Sethe, Beloved, and Denver later go to the Clearing, Beloved’s ghostly manifestation rubs Sethe’s neck before it starts to choke her.\textsuperscript{149} Believing it to be Baby Suggs’ spirit, Sethe allows Beloved to then massage the sudden pain back out. And by the end of the novel, Beloved drains Sethe of all resources, to the point that Sethe appears visibly withered. “I think I’ve lost my mother….”\textsuperscript{150} Denver expresses to Paul D on his way back to 124. Just as \textit{Beloved} is a narrative about this escaped slave woman’s personal journey, it also details the transformation and degradation of her body. Encountering homes acting as storage for our memories can have deeply lasting effects. As Bachelard writes: “But over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits.”\textsuperscript{151} The memories accumulated from previous places of dwelling have the potential to take on more visceral qualities, which Morrison presents through the ghost Beloved manifesting herself in a new form.

As is the case with laying claim to an oneiric space, reclaiming the self necessitates a sense of belonging. Living freely in a space is a recognizable way to belong, particularly for those formerly enslaved. Not only does it illustrate a renewed self, it allows time to begin moving forward again. For enslaved people, time is inconsistent, it does not promise or

\textsuperscript{148} Morrison, \textit{Beloved}, page 61.  
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., page 113.  
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., page 314.  
\textsuperscript{151} Bachelard, \textit{The Poetics of Space}, page 14.
guarantee regularity. A home, however, can aid in stabilizing the body from fluctuating across time. Even with the presence of a ghost, Sethe felt 124 was where she belonged, it was a familiar space. That is, until Paul D arrived and shook the table. She reflects on the sudden, alien feeling 124 now had while in the keeping room.

124 was so full of strong feelings perhaps she was oblivious to the loss of anything at all… When she woke the house crowded in on her… there was no room for any other thing or body until Paul D arrived no broke up the place, making room, shifting it, moving it over to someplace else, then standing in the place he had made… Emotions sped to the surface in his company. Things became what they were…

With Sethe’s comfort laid bare, she has a greater awareness of her space, made empty. Time means little to Sethe who has had her life torn from her over and over again, only to continue walking, to have no choice but continue. But then, what use is time for a body whose past rocks on water, present rejects their humanity, and whose future may not exist? In the context of slavery, it may be useful to consider Sethe as ahistorical, one who can so easily slip from past to present. The keeping room is important for her preservation because these dwellings which house memories have an ability to ground its inhabitants, for the enslaved body often exists outside of time. Temporality and human progress are assumed to continuously move forward in progressive motion. This idea relies on the assumption that as the human race moves toward the future, it should inherently improve upon the past. Linearity is perceived as a central means of documenting history, which becomes more evident in the context of Black histories. Scholar Michelle Wright discusses the use of a linear progress narrative in her book *Physics of Blackness* as the primary way in which scholars analyze various black narratives. Doing so with a neo-slave

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narrative such as *Beloved* is a near-impossible project because it relies on inconsistent
temporality to reveal Sethe’s story. Part of Sethe’s struggle with reclaiming her body includes
knowing how she—and characters like her—defies expectations of linearity. To do so, one must
delve deeper into the progress narrative and its function as a historical tool.

The linear progress narrative stems from the inscription of Newtonian laws onto space
and time, which then get conflated into a singular “spacetime.” Newton’s vision of space and
time consisted of geometrical objects holding shape that moved at a rate independent of our
perceptions of time. In his view, the forward movement of space and time were fundamental
to their existence. With his developed laws of motion also set in place, a more fully realized
version of spacetime was created as a linear progress narrative. It gained mass appeal, invoking
the plan of God and the forward-moving man, this also allowed thinkers at the time to rationalize
European-based civilizations as “ahead” of others. Leading, of course, to notions of the Third
World and the “backwards” savage. In reality, it is plain to see that the case of continual progress
has flaws when we compare similar acts of colonialist conquest from the earliest centuries to
now, among other seemingly “backwards” instances. Wright also suggests that civilizations of
the West simultaneously use Epiphenomenal spacetime to further its histories. This, in short, is
the use of past, present, and future to describe certain moments along a chronological timeline in
a movement that can only go from past to future.

Utilizing Epiphenomonal linear progress narratives becomes relevant to Black
communities through the Middle Passage Epistemology. Beginning in West Africa with the start

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154 Ibid.
of the Atlantic Slave Trade—it is important to note that this epistemology starts specifically with this slave trade—it “…is a compelling narrative used by millions to tell themselves they ‘know’ they are Black because they can locate their ancestry within this history.” There is a certain fantastical, almost mythical way that it is used to illustrate stories of oppression, struggle, and eventual freedom, particularly in slave narratives. This is also evident in Morrison’s work which includes mythic characters like Beloved who collapse time into one moment, erasing past, present, and future. Plantations in particular are unique temporal areas that seem to reappear in each iteration of the present day. Katherine McKittrick elaborates further on this phenomenon:

Yet to return to the plantation, in the present, can potentially invite unsettling and contradictory analyses wherein: the sociospatial workings of antiblack violence wholly define black history; this past is rendered over and done with, and the plantation is cast as a ‘backward’ institution that we have left behind; the plantation moves through time… that calls for the prison, the city, and so forth.

What McKittrick describes as Plantation Logic has a tendency to return in different forms across time. This logic, that casts marginalized people in violent institutions while the supremacist class creates the rules of the world, appears in contemporary forms. All the while, the plantation under slavery is viewed as an institution “in the past” because linear progress narratives position them that way. As one realizes that these spatial practices continue under different guises in different time periods, it is important to consider how Black, Indigenous, and Asian people can possibly heal if the colonial plantation has never left. Too often, discussions about future visions of the world and ‘moving forward’ rely on current definitions of humanity, meaning that Others must

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155 Wright, Physics of Blackness, page 43.
157 Indigenous to the U.S, Mexico, Central America, Canada, Hawai’i, and Alaska
158 internment camp, boarding school, detention facility
strive toward “normal” spaces and livelihood to be considered acceptable and progressive. As McKittrick writes:

…When the lands of no one were transformed by plantocracy\textsuperscript{159} logics… the question of encounter is often read through our present form of humanness, with spaces for us… being cast as the locations the oppressed should strive toward.\textsuperscript{160}

Colonialism created boundaries—both real and imagined—marking these lands of no one as geographically inferior under the assumption that “those indigenous to ‘new’ landmasses in Africa and the Americas also have nascent, and therefore unsophisticated and underdeveloped, worldviews.”\textsuperscript{161} Globalizing that ideology, then constructing the dominant group’s way of life as correct and normal, establishes a goal for these marginalized groups to strive toward. These groups must continuously move forward, otherwise chance being considered primitive. However, note how groups under supremacist classes can freely advance and “go back to their roots” or engage in more “environmentally friendly practices” without issue. The Western epiphenomenal linear progress narratives runs the risk of servicing only dominant groups, thereby denying marginalized peoples autonomy over their own histories, it is also useful in that it offers global Black communities a means of establishing a collective identity. Of course, not every history can be traced to the Middle Passage; it can be considered an avenue which groups of people can establish proximity to one another. Denver demonstrates the importance of building community in order to work through one’s trauma. Attempting to mitigate it on one’s own can lead to a fate similar to Sethe: a body overwhelmed, threatened by the possibility of falling apart piece by piece.

\textsuperscript{159} Plantation logics
\textsuperscript{160} McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” page 9.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., page 6.
Past, present, and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another. In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing.

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Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*
By concurrently reading Morrison and Bachelard’s texts, one can begin to see how ideas can be translated across different mediums. These disparate works mirror much of the same messages surrounding relationships between the home and memories. Homes serve as a tool one can use to better understand the state and sources of their daydreams. Despite striking similarities to *Beloved*, due to his biases, Bachelard brings to question whether or not he intended for this theory to apply to anyone outside of white French citizens. Utilizing *Beloved* then helps to sift through his essential ideas and make it useful for different communities. Through Bachelard’s oneiric house, one can see how the phenomenological approach to self-reflection using the home proves valuable. However, there are these aspects of his work that reflect short-sighted ideologies. He writes:

> When we dream of the house we were born in, the utmost depths of revery, we participate in this original warmth, in this well-tempered matter of the maternal paradise. This is the environment in which the protective beings live. We shall come back to the maternal features of the house.\(^{162}\)

124 disrupts these expectations of a “well-tempered” home, and instead of having maternal—rather, parental—features, the house on Bluestone Road exhibits childish spite, inciting fear in those who approach it. Perhaps it would be more useful to suggest that the home can mirror the parental personalities of those inhabiting that space. Morrison’s work certainly helps to illustrate this idea through Sethe. Allowing these texts to speak to one another, one can find that Morrison contextualizes *Poetics of Space* in a way that not only decenters whiteness, but also utilizes tropes and characters more relatable to African diasporic audiences. Sethe is a mother who has risked her life for her children, who would rather they suffer by her own hands than those of a

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\(^{162}\) Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, page 88.
violent outsider. Is this not the same philosophy 124 follows? Denver further illustrates this parallel through her evolving views toward Beloved and Sethe.

Denver notes an initial drive to protect Beloved from her mother, concerned that Sethe’s unpredictable actions could place them all in danger. That is, until she realizes too late that the real threat is Beloved.\textsuperscript{163} It is important to recognize the ways in which our dwelling spaces reflect our own personas in an effort to practice better self-reflection. As one deeply investigates how they occupy personal spaces, they can also gain insight into the ways they also occupy public space. When coping with any form of trauma, having this heightened awareness of one’s space can provide perspective on potential actions to take in an effort to better cope with it. The home can act as a truly effective vehicle through which one can mediate traumas. Scholar and author Karla F.C. Holloway articulates the power Morrison’s work has in reclaiming histories that continue to haunt black women:

The literary and linguistic devices that can facilitate the revision of the historical and cultural texts of black women’s experiences have perhaps their most sustained illustration in Toni Morrison’s Beloved. Here, narrative structures have been consciously manipulated through a complicated interplay between the implicit orature of recovered and (re)membered events and the explicit structures of literature. The reclamation and revision of history function as both a thematic emphasis and textual methodology… Myth dominates the text. Not only has Morrison’s reclamation of this story from the scores of people who interviewed Margaret Garner shortly after she killed her child in 1855 constituted an act of recovery, it has accomplished a mythic revisioning as well.\textsuperscript{164}

This current landscape, which places the onus on young people to be their own agents of change, necessitates innovation in how we think about traumatic events. Works like Beloved allow us to

\textsuperscript{163} Morrison, Beloved, age 286.
simultaneously dip into the distant past with the narrative, the near-past when considering Morrison wrote this in the 80’s, and the outlines for a future. One novel inhabiting multiple spacetimes tells us that there are cultural links that take new shape, which also tells us that these issues are simply reforming, rather than transforming into something new. Katherine McKittrick recognizes this through plantation logic, reminding readers that the plantation concept is an ever-changing logic that continues to reappear in spaces that marginalize communities into an Us/Them dichotomy. With this knowledge, one can start to develop strategies addressing the underlying links rather than each new form that takes hold.

I hope to continue positioning texts in conversations that reveal something about the spaces we inhabit and the traumas we endure. In doing this, I seek to not only add nuance to conversations surrounding pain in communities, but also move toward a place of healing. In the long run, action makes the most difference in bringing change. However, I have found that using both academic and fictional literature contributes by fueling said action with intention. Bachelard’s work, for example, not only allows one to think critically about Beloved, it also encourages one to examine the spaces they occupy. In becoming Bachelard’s topoanalyst, we can then question how we are reflected in the home and whether or not these reflections change in the presence of another space. Beloved demonstrates that fostering a stronger community can be achieved through comprehensive study of their oneiric houses.

The act of healing, the hard work of healing can only begin with self-reflection. Where Bachelard’s Poetics of Space focuses primarily on the individual’s relationship with their home, Morrison’s novel expands it to also incorporate a community. Bachelard’s text does not delve

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into the dynamics of an oneiric space inhabited by many. His original house mentions family, but does not account for them in describing features of the home. By reading *Beloved* with this phenomenological lens, the reader-daydreamer can further expand their definition of the function of homes. The spaces in between the lines of these texts hold a certain, very salient haunting, which forces our own experiences and memories to become wrapped up in the text. As Morrison uses the home to draw connections to the past, we can also use these narratives to frame our own hauntings. Without critical readings of such texts, we risk attempting to navigate ever-oppressive landscapes while suspended within an immemorial domain. Beating back the past as Sethe did will not stop its roaring, eventually, it will envelop us, drown us. Revisiting it, transforming its oneiric dwelling into one worth inhabiting may leave us gasping for air as we break surface; but, we will still continue breathing.
Bibliography


