

Rummell, Kathryn: **Toni Morrison's "Beloved": Transforming the African Heroic Epic**

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For over two decades, Toni Morrison has rebelled against Eurocentric readings of her novels, arguing instead that her works demand an Afrocentric approach. In a 1983 interview with Nellie McKay, for instance, Morrison illustrated the problems of a Eurocentric approach to her fiction, claiming that her novels are written according to "some structure that comes out of a different culture....I represent how characters and things function in the black cosmology" (McKay 425). Similarly, she has combated the notion of a "universal" standard for novels; stories, she argues, should serve the community from which they originate. As she told Thomas LeClair in 1981, "I never asked Tolstoy to write for me, a little colored girl in Lorain, Ohio....And I don't know why I should be asked to explain your life to you" (LeClair 28). Indeed, Morrison hopes her novels reflect and create the African-American community much as Faulkner's novels reflect the community of Yoknapatawpha County. An admirer of Faulkner, Morrison explains: "Faulkner wrote what I suppose could be called regional literature and had it published all over the world. It is good ... because it is specifically about a particular world. That's what I wish to do" (LeClair 28). In other words, Morrison attempts to recreate and preserve the cultural values of *her* community, an undertaking which demands that we understand the "black cosmology" out of which she writes.

In order to do so, of course, we must recognize that this cosmology comes not only from African-American culture, but ultimately from African culture itself. Morrison pays allegiance to this African culture by consistently drawing on its folklore and mythology in her novels. Maxine Montgomery, for instance, writes that Morrison's emphasis on dreams, omens, and myths in *Sula* suggests a West African heritage (Montgomery 127). Morrison tells McKay that *Song of Solomon* "comes out of a black myth about a flying man" (McKay 418), and she explains to LeClair that she researched a story about a tar lady in African mythology when *Tar Baby* was germinating in her mind (LeClair 27). These borrowings of African folklore are intentional and conscious, even while the precise origin of the story may not be entirely clear. As Morrison relates, such stories were simply "part of the folklore of my life" (LeClair 27). Morrison elaborated on this notion in a live, three-hour interview on CSPAN's *Book TV* on February 4, 2001. In response to a call-in question regarding her use of African symbols and rituals, Morrison replied: "Once in a while, the connections are deliberate, when I'm trying to feed into a culture that is older than the one that blacks cobbled together in this country and the diaspora" (Morrison, "In Depth: Toni Morrison"). She continued, however, by explaining that she more often draws on the culture she grew up with--her mother's, grandmother's, and great-grandmother's traditions and lore. Speaking of ghosts and other elements of her novels, Morrison explained: "all of these things are all part of the mythology, the culture that I grew up in, and apparently have real living life in other African cultures that have been redistributed among us, and I would just love to see the history of some of those things taken from my books" (Morrison, "In Depth: Toni Morrison").

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The purpose of this essay is to suggest another source for the "cobbled-together" culture Morrison invokes, specifically as it relates to her 1987 novel, *Beloved*. In both style and content, *Beloved* reflects the values and themes of the African heroic epic. Morrison's novel represents a transformation of this epic tradition--one certainly transfigured as it made its way across the Middle Passage, through slavery, and into the twentieth century. African stories and traditions, though, survived in this fashion, helping to create an African-American culture which, as John W. Roberts believes, necessarily draws upon and transforms features of African culture in order to maintain African values under new conditions (Roberts 12). In fact, according to Roberts, African heroic epics "existed as a vital form of African oral literature at the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and could have easily served as expressive models for spiritual song creation and performance" (121). Given this evidence, it seems likely that these epics would have continued to survive in bits and pieces during slavery and afterwards. Accordingly, Morrison draws upon the transformed African heroic epic tradition in *Beloved*. Exploring some of these African values as they evidence themselves in the African heroic epic and in *Beloved* will illustrate the ways in which the epic and the novel create and endorse cultural values.

The African heroic epic represents one of the most comprehensive surveys of African customs and values (Johnson 320). These multi-generic narratives provide keen insight into the moral systems of African societies, and reflect the richness and complexity of their cultures. Folklorist Daniel P. Biebuyck calls the Nyanga epics, for example, "cultural monuments, providing a rich perspective on the wealth and diversity of Nyanga culture" (*Hero and Chief* 5). As "cultural monuments," epics preserve and celebrate cultural values and customs. Additionally, the epics serve to unify the listening community by reminding them of the value of their culture. As Biebuyck writes, "the epics create in the listeners' minds a sense of belonging, a feeling of greatness and pride" (*Hero and Chief* 5). The epics, then, gather the community and tell its stories, all the while nourishing and honoring cultural values and behaviors.

Morrison envisions a similar role for her novels. As early as 1981, she identified her writing as "village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe" (LeClair 26). Like the epics, her novels "give nourishment" to her community (LeClair 26) as they tell the community's stories. On several occasions Morrison has compared the function of her novels to that of music for the earlier black community. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison writes that "for a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer *exclusively* ours; we don't have exclusive rights to it....So another form has to take that place, and it seems to me that the novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that it was not needed before" (340). In other words, African Americans have had to turn to the novel as a means of cultural survival and preservation. According to Anthony J. Berret, Morrison's novels create a "literary culture in which [African Americans] can find themselves represented and integrated into modern society" (113). By building this literary culture, then, Morrison's novels become a sort of cultural monument to the African-American community.

In creating these cultural monuments, both the African epic and Morrison's novels depend upon performative strategies. Biebuyck defines the African heroic epic as a "long, orally transmitted narrative presented in an episodic manner" ("African Heroic Epic" 5). Incorporating almost all of the literary forms known to Africans, the heroic epic is a multi-generic performance sung by a bard, and then narrated episode by episode. The performance can include rhythm, song, dance, drama and poetry (Biebuyck and Mateene 13-14). Morrison's novel, too, can be read as a "performance" of African and African-American culture. Indeed, Morrison herself urges that her novels be read as outgrowths of the oral tradition (McKay 421); she explains that she attempts to

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capture authentic "black language" in "the way words are put together, the metaphors, rhythms, the music" (Ruas 219). The oral nature of Morrison's novel, then, echoes the epic performance.

In the epic and in Morrison's novel, the performance depends on an active audience. When describing the Nyanga epic performance, Biebuyck attests to the participatory quality of the epic: "Invariably, the narration of oral texts draws a participating crowd in the African communities" ("Epic as Genre" 262). This same participatory impulse drives Morrison's novel. She enjoins her readers to help create the text: "[The reader and I] invent the work together....It's a total communal experience" (Davis 148). In a different interview, Morrison describes her works as containing "holes and spaces so the reader can come into it....

My writing expects, demands participatory reading" (Tate 125). In *Beloved*, then, she draws readers in as both audience and creators, investing them with a sense of involvement in the novel's community. Additionally, the oral nature of the prose begs to be read aloud; readers in some way share Morrison's role as creator in that they participate in the sound of the work. In "Rootedness" Morrison identifies the "ability to be both print and oral literature" as a characteristic of Black art itself, and she defines a successful novel to be one which tries to "make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify" (341). This quotation does not mean Morrison views her role as that of a moral leader, like a preacher, but instead that she refuses to separate the print and oral qualities of her texts. Like a preacher, she has "created" her texts; but, also like a preacher, she encourages her congregation of readers to help her deliver those texts. Morrison envisions for her novels, then, what Biebuyck and Mateene call "group solidarity and mass participation" (14).

Interestingly, Morrison highlights the importance of both storytelling and participatory reading within *Beloved* itself. Sethe and Denver perform as storytellers time and again--both

trying to satisfy Beloved's insatiable need to be entertained, which is an indication of her cultural starvation. Beloved (and Denver, too, for that matter) needs to hear stories in order to feel a sense of belonging, a sense of community. The stories that Denver and Sethe tell relate the story of their family--Denver's birth, Sethe's earrings, and finally the more troubling and guilt-laden stories of Sethe's actions in the woodshed. The most striking example of participatory storytelling is when Denver tells Beloved the story of Denver's birth. For Denver, the story is a way of keeping Beloved's attention, a "net to hold Beloved" (76). Like the epic bard, Denver embellishes the sketchy story she has heard all her life (76). As she adds details, the story itself comes alive for Denver: "Denver was seeing it now and feeling it" (78). In a passage reminiscent of Quentin and Shreve in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Denver speaks while Beloved listens, and the "monologue [becomes], in fact, a duet ... as the two did the best they could to create what really happened" (78). Through the act of storytelling, then, the two girls try to recapture the past and rewrite their own histories. Additionally, Morrison has modeled for her readers the type of participatory reading her novels demand; the "monologue" of *Beloved* becomes a duet, or even a chorus, when read properly.

In addition to the participatory nature of the epic and *Beloved*, both defy traditional chronological narration. The episodes of the African epic, for instance, are not organized chronologically, nor are they told in any specific order. Frequently, the bard repeats episodes to emphasize their importance (Biebuyck, "African Heroic Epic" 24; Seydou 315). Morrison's stream-of-consciousness technique also disrupts a chronological ordering of her text, and sometimes variations of the same story are repeated by different characters. For example, there are multiple versions of the story of Denver's birth. Sethe tells Denver a little

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bit about Denver's birth at the beginning of the narrative (31-35), and Denver subsequently retells the story to Beloved, adding more details and rounding out the understanding of the event (76-85). These techniques might underscore the notion that Morrison's novel, like the epic, is not a stagnant text; it circulates as an on-going, shifting narrative in order to serve the fluctuating needs of the community. Additionally, like the African epic, *Beloved* functions as a circular narrative. The refrain in the final section of the novel, repeated three times, changes slightly in its third use. "It was not a story to pass on" (274) becomes "This is not a story to pass on" (275). Shifting from past to present tense signifies repetition with a difference, reminding readers of the interdependence of past and present within the story itself. The section (as well as the novel) culminates in the name of the girl that the section describes: "Beloved" (275). This name, the last word of the text, immediately recalls the first word of the text, the title, returning back to the beginning through the circular technique. This poetic and musical technique, then, becomes a trope for Morrison's narrative strategy.

Perhaps the most intriguing stylistic similarity between the epic and *Beloved* is the vivid use of language in both. According to Biebuyck, the epic bard is acutely aware of the "finest nuances of the grammatical system" and possesses a rich vocabulary (*Hero and Chief* 75). He further maintains that the bard is a master of poetic usages, and has a sophisticated grasp of the metaphorical properties of the "word" ("African Heroic Epic" 28). Epic bards frequently use stylistic and aesthetic devices such as repetition, onomatopoeia, exclamations, and enjambment (Biebuyck, "African Heroic Epic" 29). These qualities combine to produce a work rich in metaphoric and vivid language, and one that lends itself to song.

Morrison, too, is a master of language. She brings her descriptions to life by using evocative and unusual images. 124 is a house "palsied by the baby's fury" (5), Baby Suggs dies "soft as cream" (7), and Sethe's dress is "stiff, like rigor mortis" (153). Adding to her vivid descriptions is Morrison's use of synesthesia. Sethe considers the "size of the miracle: its flavor" (161), and the dying landscape has "insistent and loud voices" (116). Morrison explains that she capitalizes on the resonant language of African Americans: it is "full of metaphor and imagery....It has sight and sound" (Jones 140). She recognizes the importance of language in her community: "[Language] is the thing that black people love so much--the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them" (LeClair 27). Her task as an artist, then, is to make the language "appear effortless. It must not sweat" (LeClair 27). Indeed, critics have long praised Morrison's lyricism. Barbara Hill Rigney writes that a "musical quality of language, a sound and rhythm ... pervade [Morrison's] work," ultimately pronouncing that Morrison "sings her novels (and anyone who has heard Morrison read from her work will know this is literally as well as metaphorically true)" (8).

In addition to sharing performative qualities, African epics and Morrison's *Beloved* also reflect the richness and complexity of their cultures. Though it is of course dangerous to speak of a generalized "African" culture, the efforts of Biebuyck and other folklorists suggest, for the most part, African cultures value harmony, restraint, and community ("Heroic Epic" 28). Furthermore, Biebuyck and Mateene argue, these values are the main themes in the African epic tradition (34). The three themes are interrelated within the epics and the societies: excess (a lack of restraint) leads to destruction (a lack of harmony within the community). An obvious parallel presents itself in Morrison's portrayal of the African-American community in *Beloved*. Baby Suggs's excess of hospitality and generosity leads the community to envy, thus disrupting the harmony of the community. Sethe's excessive love drives her to murder her own daughter, upsetting the harmony even further (163). Finally, Sethe's excessive pride prevents the community from helping her after she is released

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from jail, prohibiting any resolution or appeasement (256).

An additional thematic similarity comes in the relationship of the individual to the community. Most African societies see a delicate balance between the individual and the community. The individual must follow his own destiny, while not surpassing the limits of the community. As Roberts asserts, the collective power of the group is measured by the individual powers of its members. If one member's power is upset, the harmony of the group is disrupted, and the community takes action to restore this balance (Roberts 128). This, too, exists in *Beloved*: Beloved slowly drains Sethe's "power"--her "self." When the community discovers this they assemble to restore the harmony and to strengthen their collective power (257).

True to Morrison's ambiguity, however, the community is not always blameless. For example, when Baby Suggs's "three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve)," the community not only gets jealous, but also angry (137). Everything seems to come easily for Baby Suggs, "an ex-slave who had probably never carried one hundred pounds to the scale, or picked okra with a baby on her back" (137). As a result, the community does not take care of Baby Suggs, Sethe, and the children. It is within their power to warn 124 of schoolteacher's arrival, but they turn their back, "offended ... by excess" (138). Morrison thus hints that Sethe and Baby Suggs are not the only disruptive factors in the balance between individual and community--the community, also, is to blame.

The main themes become clearer when examining the function of the African hero within the epic. Such a hero is almost always outside of the community (Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief* 4; Bird and Kendall 13; Seydou 314). He is often an agent of disequilibrium who, by upsetting the balance, ultimately restores the harmony (Bird and Kendall 13). Additionally, the hero is not always successful (Biebuyck and Mateene 145), and he is not always an imitable model for action (Seydou 314). Thus the hero's actions are not always aspired to or validated by the community (Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief* 68). Rather, these actions are viewed as an indicator that the balance between the individual and the community has been upset. Ultimately, however, it is up to the hero to restore this harmony (Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief* 111).

Morrison's novel reflects the functions of these epic heroes as well, but she transforms these male heroes into the female figures of Beloved and Denver. The obvious change in gender here is worth examining. As Isidore Okpewho demonstrates, heroes in African epic poetry are almost always male; consider Mwindo, Sunjata, Kanji, and Akoma Mba (85, 87). The use of the male as epic hero is not surprising, considering that the bulk of Western epic heroes are male as well. In the epic tradition, both Western and African, the hero performs a series of actions leading up to the fulfillment of his quest. In general, the focus of the epic is on the actions rather than the psychological and emotional states of the hero.

Morrison's revision from a male hero to female heroines enables her to shift that focus from the physical to the psychological, and allows her to emphasize the telling of the act as well as the act itself. According to Karla Holloway, this shift is indicative of black female writers, and represents one of the most prominent and important differences between contemporary black male and female authors (*Moorings and Metaphors* 7). Holloway writes that "the dominant mediums of the [black male] text are behavior and act," while also asserting that "black women writers seem to concentrate on shared ways of saying" (*Moorings and Metaphors* 9, 7). Transforming the traditional African epic hero to a heroine, then, allows Morrison to combine the traditions of the African heroic epic and the female African American writer: she focuses on both action and voice in *Beloved*. Additionally, the change in gender highlights the centrality of women's roles in the African-American community. Women's voices, as well as their actions, have long been silenced within this community, and Morrison's revision enables her to

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reposition women at the center of African-American cultural identity.

Having demonstrated some general stylistic and thematic similarities between the genre of the African heroic epic and *Beloved*, two specific African epics will be examined in order to further the argument. Two of the most widely studied epics (among Western and African scholars) come from the Nyanga and the Mande cultures.¹ These epics, like other African heroic epics, record and preserve their society's customs and values. In both, the hero lives outside of the community's sanctioned boundaries, and ultimately endorses those limits for the community. An examination of the Nyanga and Mande epics will demonstrate that *Beloved* and *Denver* are transformed manifestations of the African epic hero, while also illustrating Morrison's revision of the traditional African epic.²

The Nyanga Epic Tradition and *Beloved*

The Nyanga heroic epic outlines the evolution of the hero from a reckless young man to the mature true chief (Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief* 4). In other words, there are two prototypes for heroes--the adventurous hero unschooled in the ways of wisdom, and the true chief guided by this wisdom. Ideally, the hero receives the teachings and becomes the true chief; this is his ultimate destiny (Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief* 4). However, in two of the six recorded versions of this epic, the hero and chief are separate characters, and in one case they are brothers (Biebuyck and Mateene 20). This model of the hero and chief can be applied to *Beloved* and *Denver*; in such a reading, *Beloved* represents the reckless hero, while *Denver* transcends this level and becomes the true chief.

The best-known Nyanga epic hero is Mwindo, who, though small, is endowed with several gifts (Biebuyck and Mateene 11). For instance, he can move in water and on land, he demonstrates special powers, and he is usually considered to have had an unusual birth (Biebuyck and Mateene 11). Immediately a link between Mwindo and *Beloved* is revealed. Like Mwindo, *Beloved* can travel on land and in the water. Her first physical appearance in the novel is when she "walk[s] out of the water" (50). *Beloved* also demonstrates special powers; she "disappears" in the cold house with *Denver* (123). Furthermore, like Mwindo, who determines his own moment of birth, *Beloved* can claim an unusual birth (Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief* 100). *Beloved* is "born" when she takes on a physical form and walks out of the water, fully grown (50). Because of his unusual birth, Mwindo's principal epithet in the epics is *Kabutwa-Kenda* or, "Little-one-just-born-he-walked" (Biebuyck and Mateene 11). This epithet bears striking resemblance to the many references to the "crawling-already? baby" (99). Similarly, if *Beloved*'s "birth" is considered to be her emergence from the water, she is walking then as well (50).

The Nyanga hero is young, impetuous, and full of pathos. He is guided by *ate*, a "reckless ambition resulting from the fact that he has not received *mahano* (teachings about what is right and wrong, good and evil)" (Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief* 4). His actions are described in terms of destroying and challenging, and many of his behavioral patterns are opposite of those valued by Nyanga society (Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief* 4, 68). There are connections between this hero and *Beloved*. *Beloved*, too, is driven by a "reckless ambition"--she wants to take back her life by "joining" with *Sethe* (213). *Beloved* has not received *mahano*--she cannot distinguish right from wrong. Further, Morrison portrays *Beloved*'s actions in terms of opposition and violence. From the very start of the novel readers see *Beloved*'s violent and spiteful "haunting" of 124. Mirrors shatter, kettles tumble, and slop jars turn over, all because of the baby ghost's "outrage" (4). As *Beloved* grows in strength, all of her interactions with *Sethe* become challenging and destructive--she "complains," "takes," and "accuses" (241).

Part of Mwindo's propensity for destruction undoubtedly stems from his relationship with his father. Immediately after Mwindo is born his father rejects him--ordering him killed several times (Biebuyck and Mateene 56). Mwindo,

¹ The Nyanga inhabit the rainforest region in what is now Zaire, and their epic tradition has been extensively studied by folklorist Daniel P. Biebuyck. In his several books and articles on the Nyanga tradition, Biebuyck identifies six closely related epics which record and preserve Nyanga customs and values. The Mande inhabit West Africa, near the boundary of Mali and Guinea, though modern descendants can be found throughout West Africa. Their epic tradition has been carefully documented by Charles S. Bird and Martha B. Kendall, as well as by John W. Johnson, among others.

² I have no knowledge that Morrison is aware of these specific epics. However, as Morrison herself notes in her CSPAN interview, conscious knowledge of the origins of the folklore is not a prerequisite for her use of such material. I want to suggest that echoes of these epics, transmuted and metamorphosed, have survived in the African-American folklore Morrison is steeped in.

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however, refuses to die, and searches for his father for much of the epic (Biebuyck and Mateene 104). Though Mwindo's father proves unable to kill his son, Morrison's *Sethe* succeeds in killing her daughter. *Beloved*'s quest, even as a ghost, resembles Mwindo's; she, too, is searching for a parent who rejected her. As they recount their journeys, Mwindo's and *Beloved*'s longing for their parents is eerily similar. Mwindo sings, "I am searching for Shemwindo[his father]/In the place where Shemwindo went" (Biebuyck and Mateene 104), and *Beloved* explains, "I wait on the bridge because she is under it" (212). Just as the father-son struggle steers the Nyanga epic, so the mother-daughter struggle drives *Beloved*.

Beloved shares other characteristics with the reckless young Nyanga hero as well. For example, like Mwindo, *Beloved* possesses "supernatural" powers--she returns from the dead, after all. Additionally, *Beloved* is a monomaniac; she has one goal--to reclaim her life by "joining" with *Sethe*--and she does not care whom she hurts as long as she is successful. She effectively drives away Paul D and eventually alienates *Denver*, the loving sister who nursed her back to life and jealously guarded her secret. Additionally, as the Nyanga hero uses verbal wit and trickery to defeat his opponent, so *Beloved* employs mental and emotional "trickery" to defeat *Sethe*. *Beloved* does not engage in direct physical combat with *Sethe*; rather, she capitalizes on her mother's sense of guilt and love in order to wear *Sethe* down. *Beloved* could have chosen simply to kill *Sethe*--perhaps the strangling in the Clearing is evidence of this. Instead, however, she chooses to displace *Sethe*: "The bigger *Beloved* got, the smaller *Sethe* became" (250). *Beloved* becomes the mother, *Sethe* the child, and the possession, fought with the mind and the heart, not the hands, seems complete.

As in the Nyanga epic, though, the community does not approve of *Beloved*'s violent and destructive actions, making it clear that a Nyanga hero is not necessarily one to be imitated. The unschooled Nyanga hero's actions are valuable in that they point out how *not* to act. *Beloved* seems to serve the same purpose. The women of the community believe *Beloved* has gone too far in "whipping" *Sethe* every day (255). They find their spokesperson in *Ella*, who thinks *Beloved* has exceeded her proper place in life: "As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place--shaking stuff...*Ella* respected it. But if it took flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot...This was an invasion" (257). The community obviously does not view *Beloved*'s actions as imitable or positive. She has overstepped her bounds, demanded too much. *Beloved* has not, as a Nyanga hero must, "discover[ed] the socially approved ways of using [her] esoteric knowledge and power for the benefit of the community" (Roberts 127). She values her self above the community, and consequently *Beloved* does not become the "true chief"--that journey is left to *Denver*.

In the Nyanga epic tradition, the true chief brings "conciliation and harmony"; he is "guided by wisdom and moderation, because he has received the 'teachings'" (Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief* 4). The figure of the chief is foreshadowed in the hero, yet the hero must undergo a process of initiation before achieving full-fledged chiefdom (Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief* 4, 111). This progression is noticeable in *Denver*. At first selfishness and possessiveness motivate her, but she transcends these desires as she undergoes her initiation into *mahano*. In Morrison's novel, *mahano* means understanding the difference between the self and the community, and creating a mutually hospitable environment for both. Individuals must necessarily interact in the community while still retaining their separate identities. *Beloved*'s final destruction comes because she does not understand this delicate balance. *Denver*, on the other hand, ultimately learns this lesson, transcending the role of hero to become the chief.

At the beginning of the novel, however, *Denver* is perhaps just as selfish as *Beloved*. For example, *Denver* only wants to hear stories about the past if they concern her: "Denver hated the

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stories her mother told her that did not concern herself, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about. The rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by *Denver*'s absence from it" (62). This is the perversion of participatory storytelling; if stories are meant to serve the community, *Denver*'s sense of alienation prohibits her from listening to those stories. The only stories she wants to hear are those which feature her, those which privilege the self over the community and therefore contribute to *Denver*'s selfishness and her isolation. *Denver*, like *Beloved*, feels "lonely and rebuked" (13), and is hungry for companionship. More than that, though, *Denver* seems to want something she can claim as her own.

Beloved becomes this claim. As *Beloved* wants to possess *Sethe*, so *Denver* wants to possess *Beloved* (54). After the numerous departures in *Denver*'s life (Howard, Buglar, Baby Suggs, and the father she never knew), *Beloved*'s arrival is sweet and miraculous. *Denver* finally has someone she can care for, and she assumes the role of *Beloved*'s protector. She wants

to warn Beloved about Sethe: "Don't love her too much. Don't. Maybe it's still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children ... I have to protect [Beloved]" (206). And, echoing Beloved's refrain about Sethe, Denver says, "she's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (209). What neither Beloved nor Denver realizes at this point is that to claim another's identity is not to claim one's own. Denver, the chief, will eventually understand this distinction, while the unlearned Beloved is destroyed by her inability to understand it.

According to Biebuyck and Mateene, the Nyanga hero is not always successful. His failures, however, are important lessons along the path to becoming the true chief (145). Denver, too, experiences setbacks, as evidenced in her first attempt to join the community. At age seven Denver spends almost a year at Lady Jones's school, learning to read and write. This achievement is significant to Denver because she "had done it on her own" (102). In a very real way, she is gaining a voice. With her initial experience at Lady Jones's school, Denver is finally in the "company of her peers" (102), participating in her community.

Denver's feelings of acceptance and self-worth are subsequently shattered when Nelson Lord asks her, "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went?" (104). From that moment on, Denver retreats from the community: "124 and the field behind it were all the world she knew or wanted" (101). For a while Denver even isolates herself from Sethe and Baby Suggs: "For two years she walked in a silence too solid for penetration" (103). Ironically, it is Beloved, the baby ghost, who restores Denver's hearing, and thus her limited interaction with her family (103). After learning that Sethe had murdered her own child, Denver concentrates solely on the baby ghost (105). She avoids the outside world, because from her limited perspective whatever "made it all right for my mother to kill my sister ... comes from outside this house, outside the yard" (205). For Denver, the world beyond 124 is frightening and threatening, and she retreats into a world populated only by herself, Sethe, and Beloved.

Just as Beloved needs Sethe in order to have a "self," so Denver needs Beloved. Denver spends "all of [her] outside self loving [Sethe]" (207), but saves her inside self for her sister. Beloved focuses solely on the hours spent with Sethe, while Denver concentrates on her time with Beloved. "Denver is a strategist now and has to keep Beloved by her side from the minute Sethe leaves for work until the hour of her return" (121). Beloved gives Denver a life, a self, and satisfies Denver's hunger. In fact, Beloved becomes Denver's self. When Beloved disappears in the cold house Denver cries because "she has no self. Death is a skipped meal compared to this. She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing" (123). When Beloved reappears Denver "pinches a piece of Beloved's skirt between her fingers and holds on" (123-4), thus physically holding on to her self. At this point in the novel, neither young woman realizes that a self

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must come from within. Both attempt to "share" another's self--Beloved joins Sethe, and here Denver tries to join Beloved.

In fulfilling her destiny as the true chief, however, Denver ultimately recognizes her true self and her role within the community. Her initiation process begins when Denver is excluded from Sethe's and Beloved's games (240). Because she has a more objective viewpoint, Denver realizes that Beloved is not in danger--Sethe is (240, 241). Beloved demands, Sethe gives, and Denver begins "protecting her mother from Beloved" (243). Denver slowly understands that she must "leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (243). The beginning of Denver's initiation comes in her awakening to her self--her movement away from Beloved and Sethe and towards the outside world in which she finally takes part. As is common in African societies, Denver gathers courage from a conversation with her dead grandmother (Beattie and Middleton xix; Morrison 244). Baby Suggs tells Denver that although there is no defense against whites (and thus against fear itself), Denver must nevertheless "know it, and go on out the yard" (244).

Denver's initiation continues when she approaches Lady Jones for help. It is Lady Jones's "baby," said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated [Denver's] life in the world as a woman" (248). With her entreaty for help comes Denver's acceptance into the community of women. The community accepts Denver as they did not accept Sethe because Denver, unlike her mother or Beloved, does not try to "do it all alone" (254). As Ella says, at least Denver "had stepped out the door, asked for the help she needed" (256). Writing about Mwindo, Erskine Peters asserts that "even the man of heroic proportions cannot make it totally on his own" (33), and Denver has now arrived at that knowledge. Armed with new-found strength from the community's support, Denver decides to "do the necessary ... to stop relying on kindness ... hire herself out somewhere" (253). Denver realizes that before she can save Sethe she must save herself: "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252). Fittingly, it is Nelson Lord who affirms Denver's self: "Take care of yourself, Denver" (252). This one sentence, equating "Denver" with a "self," "[opens] her mind" (252) and allows her to participate within the community.

Denver's assertion of her self awakens the community to its self as well. As Denver reminds the women of her mother's deed eighteen years before, she also reminds them of their responsibility for and responses to that deed--their part in the tragedy that unfolded at 124. This sign of reciprocity from the community--their respect for Denver which awakens their sense of responsibility--echoes the relationship between the Nyanga chief and his subjects: according to Biebuyck, in this relationship, "stress is placed on reciprocity in respect, awe, and generosity" (*Hero and Chief* 112). Erskine Peters agrees, adding that the "admission of guilt by the community" represents a critical step in the reconciliation of hero and people (34). In a sign of true community, the women gather at 124 to help Sethe and Denver for the first time in eighteen years. With their sound, the community reclaims Sethe and Denver, while "leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again" (262).

Denver, then, as the strong, yet quiet chief, restores the harmony between 124 and the community. She is able to do so because she first restores the harmony between "I" and "we," between her self and the community. Beloved, on the other hand, refuses to acknowledge the reciprocity between self and community: she does not understand that the self, minus the community, is simply "empty ... Alone" (262). Beloved is "disremembered" (274) because she is not a part of the community. "Although she has claim, she is not claimed" (274), and therefore is forgotten. Denver, though, as the true chief, will not be forgotten. She has endured her initiation rite, and has matured into a "fine" young woman (266). Denver's maturity is evidenced in her last encounter with Paul D. Once her mortal enemy, Paul D affirms Denver's new identity with his observation, "You

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grown" (267). Denver now recognizes that Sethe needs Paul D, and encourages him to return to her. Denver, like the Nyanga chief, represents the "supreme symbol of unity and continuity" (Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief* 106). Where Beloved brought death, Denver brings life; as Beloved meant destruction, Denver promises hope and harmony for the community. Beloved's selfishness, however, helped teach Denver *mahano*, and therefore both women serve as outgrowths of the Nyanga epic tradition.

The Mande Epic and Beloved

The Mande epic, while similar in theme to the Nyanga, highlights the supernatural and magical qualities of the hero. The focus of the heroic quest is to discover the source of the hero's magic power with which he confronts his adversary (Roberts 125). The hero's battles are not of weaponry, but rather of sorcery, and physical conflicts are superseded by supernatural ones (Johnson 317-318). The resolution of the conflict, then, involves spells and magic (Johnson 125). This emphasis on the supernatural is evidenced in *Beloved*, most notably in the character of the "ghost" Beloved. Although it is possible to argue that Beloved is a mortal character,³ by doing so ignores Morrison's plea to judge her works in the "black cosmology." Thus, consistent with echoes of the Mande epic in *Beloved*, then, Beloved is a ghost with supernatural powers, and Denver is her very mortal sister.

Central to the philosophy of the Mande world is the notion of *nya*, "means" or "life-force." According to Mande belief, everyone is born with a particular life-force, enabling him or her to perform certain acts and to be protected from those acts (Roberts 126). The powers required to perform an act are called *dalilu*. Through the performance of *dalilu*, however, dangerous forces, called *nyama*, are released. An individual's life-force protects him or her from these forces (Bird and Kendall 16). As such, the life-force determines a person's ontological and social being as well as what he can do as a being; in effect, it is his destiny (Roberts 126). The Mande hero, therefore, is "one who literally performs actions beyond his 'means'" (Roberts 126). Since the hero performs outside of his life-force, he does not naturally possess the "means" to protect himself from the *nyama* released by his particular deed. Thus the heroic quest is to acquire magical protection, thereby increasing the hero's life-force (Roberts 126). He is not a model, but a catalyst who "provides the impetus for and instigates the audience toward realizing the commonly held ideology" (Seydou 314).

In his role as a catalyst the hero must not irrevocably disrupt the harmony between individual and community. As Bird and Kendall demonstrate, Mande society believes in a dialectic tension between the individual and the group (14). This tension is best illustrated by the intersection of two axes. The first axis is *fadenya*, or "father-childness." This is the individual's axis, and the actions tend toward individual reputation. The second axis is *badenya*, or "mother-childness," emphasizing the community. Mande society recognizes the benefits and drawbacks of both axes, and strives toward an equal intersection of the two (Bird and Kendall 14).

The interdependence of the hero and the group is crucial to the well-being of the society. The hero performs his deed, but relies upon the group to validate and applaud it (Bird and

Kendall 24). Just as in Nyanga culture, it is impossible to have an "I" without a "we," and viceversa. Accordingly, a hero may increase his life-force only if it benefits the group as well as himself. If, on the other hand, the hero attempts too much too soon, "he may be consumed by the power" (Johnson 317). A successful hero in the Mande tradition, then, is not necessarily one who lives. On the contrary, the hero himself may die, but his actions benefit the community by restoring a disrupted harmony. Applying this Mande philosophy to the characters of Beloved and Denver will demonstrate that although only Denver lives, Beloved, too, functions as an epic heroine.

Both Beloved and Denver attempt to increase their life-force. Beloved's attempt is readily obvious--by returning

³ For an insightful discussion of the possibilities of Beloved's identity, see Elizabeth B. House, "Toni Morrison's Ghost: The Beloved Who is Not Beloved." *Studies in American Fiction* 18.1 (1990): 17-26.

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from the dead she is literally going beyond her means. Because Beloved's life (and therefore her life-force) has been taken from her, she must acquire some other life-force. As a parasite, Beloved finds a host in Sethe: "[Sethe's] smiling face is the place for me" (213). Beloved inverts the mother-daughter relationship; because she physically came from Sethe, is a part of Sethe, Beloved believes that Sethe is a part of her as well. In fact, Beloved seems to think that Sethe belongs to her: "it is the face I lost" (213).

In order for the Mande hero to acquire his adversary's life-force, he must weaken the life-force of his opponent (Bird and Kendall 17). Beloved first confronts Sethe from the "other" place, the ghostly place. "Lonely and rebuked" (13), she "haunts" 124, sometimes violently, sometimes quietly, but always seeking attention from Sethe. Once Beloved assumes her physical form, these confrontations become more powerful. Beloved debilitates Sethe physically and emotionally. Sethe is reduced to "pick-eating around the edges of the table and stove: the crusts and rinds and peelings of things," until the flesh between Sethe's "forefinger and thumb fade[d]" (242). Once the physical weakening is complete, Beloved preys on Sethe's feelings of guilt, compelling her to explain her actions that day in the woodshed. When Sethe's life-force becomes sufficiently vulnerable, Beloved begins to "join" (213) with Sethe, confident she "will not lose her again" (214).

If it were up to Sethe and Beloved, this symbiotic relationship would continue until Beloved completely drained Sethe's life-force. The more Beloved takes, the more Sethe gives, yielding everything "without a murmur" (250). Trapped in overwhelming guilt, Sethe does not "want forgiveness given; she [wants] it refused" (252). Because Sethe does not (cannot) stop Beloved, Beloved continues to feed on her, growing fat as Sethe slowly withers away. The ghost-daughter has succeeded in displacing Sethe's life-force: "Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child" (242). Yet by claiming Sethe's life-force, Beloved oversteps her bounds. She does not possess sufficient *dalilu* to protect herself from the *nyama*. In Johnson's words, she attempts "too much too soon" (317).

Denver, on the other hand, increases her *dalilu* in an acceptable fashion. As heroine, Denver's chief adversary is Beloved. At first possessive of Beloved, Denver eventually realizes that "the job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved" (243). Denver sees the destruction Beloved is bringing to 124, and "since neither Beloved nor Sethe seemed to care what the next day might bring ... Denver knew it was on her" (243). Accordingly, Denver consults the women of the community (through Lady Jones). This interaction with the community allows Denver to understand the power of a "self." She realizes that unless she gets work "there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either" (252). Whereas Beloved's power comes from taking Sethe's self, Denver's comes from discovering her own.

Denver furthers her identity as heroine by simply presenting her new power (her self) to the community. The community recognizes this self, approves of it: "The daughter, however, appeared to have some sense after all. At least she had stepped out the door, asked for the help she needed and wanted work" (256). Through Denver's actions, the community finally realizes that Beloved is overstepping her bounds. Beloved belongs to the "ghostly place" (257), not to the world of the living. Just as there are lines to be drawn between the individual's rights and the community's, so there are lines between the living and the dead. Ella acknowledges that "you can't just up and kill your children," but that the "children can't just up and kill the mama" either (256). This "practical woman" asserts that "what's fair ain't necessarily what's right" (256). In a world where black men and women were slaves to a white master, these same people should not have to be slaves to their own mistakes. What is past is past, and Ella does not "like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present" (256).

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When a "little communication" between the ghost world and the human world becomes "an invasion" (257), Ella convinces the others that a "rescue [is] in order" (256).

The women of the community effectively defeat Beloved by restoring Sethe's rightful life-force, yet Beloved, as the catalyst behind Denver's and the community's actions, has nevertheless proven herself to be a heroine. Through Beloved's greedy desire to increase (indeed almost reverse) her life-force, Denver and the other women realize the disequilibrium in the community and strive to restore the harmony. Denver, too, becomes a catalyst for the community's actions. She increases her life-force in an acceptable way; she performs actions beyond her means when she "step[s] off the edge of the world" (243) and enters the community. She, however, succeeds because, unlike Beloved, she is acting to help others, to strengthen the *badenya*. She does not take another's life-force to increase her own; on the contrary, she adds to the community's life-force by restoring harmony between 124 and the community.

The hero, however, does not succeed alone. The community must play a crucial role in the process. Morrison complicates this role by portraying the community ambiguously. The day after the party at 124, the community is envious of Baby Suggs and Sethe. Interestingly, this characteristic is most often found on the *fadenya* axis in the Mande tradition--jealousy indicates a selfishness that promotes the individual over community (Bird and Kendall 15). This envy might be one indication that the community must shoulder some of the responsibility for the tragedy at 124. Additionally, the community's pride (also a *fadenya* trait) prevents them from warning Sethe about schoolteacher (138). Yet in an ironic reversal, Sethe's pride, not her actions, seems to be what upsets them the most. "[Ella] understood Sethe's rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it, which Ella thought was prideful" (256). The community also alienates Paul D because they think "he's a touch proud" (186). On the one hand, then, the community ostracizes those who are too proud; on the other, though, the community itself is guilty of this very sin. The balance between the individual and the community is disrupted here, but not necessarily only because of the individual's actions.

Morrison suggests that the balance can be restored when the community and the individual relinquish their pride. She implies that asking, not taking, is the key to a harmonious community. For example, when Stamp Paid accuses Ella (and the community) of being inhospitable to Paul D, Ella answers, "can't nobody read minds long distance. All he have to do is ask somebody" (186). Similarly, when Denver asks the community for help, they offer it willingly. Asking involves two-way communication, the equal intersection of *fadenya* and *badenya*. Denver accomplishes this when she asks for help. Beloved, on the other hand, never asks for anything--she simply takes: "it was Beloved who made demands...[she] invented desire" (240). Selfish and greedy, Beloved does not reconcile *fadenya* and *badenya*, and consequently is not accepted by the community.

One last similarity between the Mande epic and *Beloved* comes from Morrison's blending of magic and reality. The Mande epic privileges the supernatural over the natural, whereas Morrison intertwines the two. For example, Beloved is very much a supernatural character; not only is she a ghost, but she also possesses supernatural, if not magical, powers. She returns from the dead, knows about things she could not possibly know (like Sethe's earrings), and even disappears into thin air (in the storehouse with Denver). Furthermore, she uses these powers to increase her life-force. After mysteriously driving Paul D away, she literally feeds on Sethe: "Beloved ate up [Sethe's] life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (250).

Contrasting this "magical" character is the very human Denver. From the beginning of the narrative readers empathize with Denver. Vulnerable, lonely, afraid to love and afraid not to,

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Denver cannot understand her mother's actions. Like Beloved, Denver is victimized by Sethe, but she overcomes this victimization through human courage and strength rather than through magic. Beloved tries to survive by claiming another "self"; Denver survives by claiming her "self." In terms of survival, then, Denver is more successful. And, as Morrison herself admits, she is interested in survival--"who survives and why" (McKay 420). Denver, as a human being, successfully increases her life-force by discovering the human power of her "self." Finding and asserting this self, Morrison illustrates, enables Denver to endure and even triumph in the African-American community.

Conclusion

In *Beloved*, Morrison is indeed interested in survival, but not solely of the individual. She is deeply committed to the survival of the African-American community. As Theodore O. Mason, Jr. reminds us, Morrison is "a writer particularly interested in depicting, and thereby preserving and perpetuating, the cultural practices of black communities" (172). Morrison's use and revision of these African heroic epics--conscious or not--illustrate her own preoccupations with cultural formation and preservation. She highlights the importance of storytelling as a way to gather the community and endorse its values, and her novel itself becomes a cultural record. Significantly, she positions women and their stories at the center of her narrative in order to give voice to their long-overlooked contributions to community and culture. Mason locates Morrison's role as cultural "conservator" in her belief in the epistemological powers of fiction and narrative (172-3). Her stories, he argues, "[act] as a method of constructing and construing the world" for characters, author, and readers (173). In many ways, the African heroic epics, in their function as "cultural monuments," serve this same purpose for the African communities they represent. In both cases, these stories preserve not only cultural values, but also cultural forms, for their communities.

Reading *Beloved* through the lens of the African heroic epic, then, sheds light on the "cobbled-together" culture Morrison refers to. Scholars have long argued that African traditions, myths, and lore linger in African-American culture; as Karla Holloway writes, "in beliefs and value systems, religion and language, echoes of the original culture persist" (*Moorings and Metaphors* 167). *Beloved* testifies to this assertion as it echoes the purpose, style and values set forth in the African heroic epic. Reading *Beloved* as an outgrowth of this tradition endorses what Erskine Peters asserts as the intellectual and pedagogical benefits of studying African literature alongside of Western literature. He maintains that doing so adds depth and significance to our understanding of the literature, and contends that the Nyanga epic in particular sheds new light on African-American history and culture: "After having learned from the [Nyanga epic], what one has ever read, heard or witnessed about the African-American past and the European past comes under a new scrutiny. Every African-American tale may have a new possibility and all of those tones and moods and phrasings in the folk ballads and the spirituals take on even deeper meanings and other degrees of interpretation" (Peters 34). Certainly the same can be said for a new understanding of Morrison's *Beloved* in light of the African heroic epic tradition. Reading *Beloved* in this way does indeed offer "new possibility" for greater understanding and also helps answer Morrison's call for a more Afrocentric approach to her novels.

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