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). 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 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").

In creating these cultural movements, both the African epic and Morrison's novels depend upon performative strategies. Biebuyck defines the African heroic epic as a "long, orally transmitted narrative, performed episode by episode" (*The African Heroic Epic* 3). Interestingly, Morrison highlights the importance of both storytelling and participatory reading within *Beloved* itself. Sethe and Denver perform as storytellers time and again—both"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" (*African Heroic Epic* 262). In both style and 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

The oral nature of Morrison's novel, then, echoes the epic performance.

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). 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 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").
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 earnings, 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 emboldens 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 Qwintin and Streeve 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 reported by different characters. For example, there are multiple versions of the story of Denver's birth. Sethe tells Denver a little

---

p.3

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 Matteene 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

---

p.4

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 forces in the balance between individual and community—the community, also, is to blame.

The main themes become clearer when we analyze 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 disquiet which, by upsetting the balance, ultimately restores the harmony (*Bird and Kendall* 13). Additionally, the hero is not always successful (*Biebuyck* and Matteene 145), and he is not always an inmutable 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 Mwendo, 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 heroine 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

---

p.5
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 further the argument. Two of the most widely studied epics (among Western and African scholars) come from the Nyanga and the Mande cultures. 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 sanctions and 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.

The Nyanga Epic Tradition and Beloved

The Nyanga hero 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 "walks" 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 epic 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).

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

1. The Nyanga inhabit the rainforest region in what is now Zaïre, 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 closelyrelated 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.

however, refuses to die, and searches for his father's heart 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 Shenwindo[his father]" (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 ghastly 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 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 ghastly 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 overstretched 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 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
The Mande Epic and Beloved

Roberts (206) notes that the hero's battle is not one of weaponry, but rather of sorcery, and physical conflicts are superseded by supernatural continuity (Biebuyck, 197). 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 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, 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 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, 318). The resolution of the conflict, then, involves spells and magic (Johnson, 125). This emphasis of 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, 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 nyu, "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 dalili. Through the performance of dalili, 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-childlessness." This is the individual's axis, and the actions tend toward individual reputation. The second axis is badenya, or "mother-childlessness," 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, 14).
Kendall 24). Just as in Nyanga culture, it is impossible to have an "I" without a "we," and vice versa. 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 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 cruts 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, the teething child" (242). Yet by claiming Sethe's life-force, Beloved oversteps her bounds. She does not possess sufficient dalili to protect herself from the nyamu. In Johnson's words, she attempts "too much too soon" (317).

Denver, on the other hand, increases her dalili 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).

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 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.

Denver, on the other hand, increases her dalili 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).

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.

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.
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.

**Works Cited**

Michael Awkward  
DATE: (1990)  
"Unruly and Let Loose': Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon.*" *Callaloo* 13: 482-498.

John Beattie  
John Middleton  
DATE: 1969

*Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa.* Y: Africana Publishing Corp.

Anthony J Berret  
DATE: (1989)  

Daniel P Biebuyck  
DATE: (1976)  

Daniel P Biebuyck  
DATE: 1972  

Daniel P Biebuyck  
DATE: 1978  

Daniel P Biebuyck  
Kahombo C Mateene  
DATE: 1969  

Charles S Bird  
Martha R Kendal  
DATE: 1980  

Christina Davis  
DATE: (1988)  

F. C. Karla Holloway  
DATE: 1992  
*Moorings and Metaphors*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.

Elizabeth B House  
DATE: (1990)  

John W Johnson  
DATE: (1980)  

Bessie W Jones  
DATE: 1985  

Toni Morrison
DATE: 1984


Nellie McKay
DATE: (1983)

"An Interview with Toni Morrison." Contemporary Literature 24: 413-429.

Idioma Okewho
DATE: 1979

The Epic in Africa. NY: Columbia UP.

Erskine Peters
DATE: (1989)


Robert Hill Rigney
DATE: 1991

The Voices of Toni Morrison. Columbus: Ohio State UP.

John W Roberts
DATE: 1989


Charles Ruas
DATE: 1985


Christine Seydou
DATE: (1983)


Claudia Tate
DATE: 1989

Black Women Writers at Work. NY: Continuum.

p.15