

# Raymond Andrews as Griot: Privileging Southern Black Communities through Oral Storytelling and Cultural History

by Brennan Collins

**Raymond Andrews' novels celebrate rural Black life by focusing on the customs and traditions of Southern African American communities. Critical to this celebration are the rhetorical strategies Andrews uses that privilege oral over literary storytelling. Using Geneva Smitherman's discussion of the griot and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s concept of the speakerly text in the context of John Miles Foley's work on comparative oral traditions, this essay explores the possibility and implications of describing Andrews' written work as a form of oral storytelling.**

Raymond Andrews wrote about the South. His essays, novels, and memoirs are all set in Georgia, and for the most part rooted in the Morgan County where he grew up during the last decades of Jim Crow (or in the thinly veiled fictional version, Muskhogean County). Though some of his characters leave for the “promised land” of Northern cities like New York and Chicago, and a few go abroad to fight in wars, Andrews' narratives never follow them across the Mason Dixon. The characters who do leave generally come back home, and their accounts of the North are always brief. The vast majority never leave the South, and so Andrews' stories are filled with the people, places, smells, sounds, and traditions of the region—cotton fields, peach orchards, barbeque, the Ku Klux Klan, juke joints, the funeral parlor, porches, Baptists, sharecropping, James Brown, Sweet Auburn, and the Man. In the tradition of Southern storytelling, his narrative voice is both unselfconscious and unapologetic—he simply wants to tell a story. He does so by intertwining family legend, African American folklore, and Southern history with his own experiences. Often bawdy and violent, and unafraid to broach typically taboo subjects, Andrews' work celebrates rural Southern Black communities on their own terms.

Andrews' style, tone, and focus place him firmly with Zora Neale Hurston in the African American literary tradition. His works are saturated with folklore and evoke oral storytelling. Andrews is deeply concerned with African American and Southern history, but he approaches these subjects through the lens of the Black Southern communities he writes about by focusing on the customs and traditions of these communities. In his works, therefore, Andrews takes on the role of the griot.<sup>1</sup> Linguist Geneva Smitherman, in *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, defines the griot as an African tribal elder, immersed in the oral storytelling tradition, who “was responsible for maintaining tribal history.” Smitherman further explains that “comprising this history was not merely the chronicles of who did what when, but composite word-pictures of the culture, belief, ethics, and values of the tribe” (1977, 148). In this essay, I use Smitherman's explanation of the griot as a framework for discussing Andrews' work. I begin by demonstrating how Andrews evokes oral forms by using literary devices like *skaz* and *free-indirect discourse* as well as modes of spoken performance like *testifying* and *call and response*. I then argue that this orality is also deeply connected to the narrative structure found in his novels. Andrews' works are based in an oral storytelling tradition which allows him to shirk developing one major plot or theme in favor of elaborating numerous cultural lessons. Some critics have judged these elaborations as digressions away from a main point. Instead, they represent a rhetorical strategy that allows Andrews to fulfill the duties of the griot. Because Andrews is particularly concerned with the day to day life of his Southern Black characters, he focuses on cultural history to create “word-pictures of the culture, belief, ethics, and values” of the communities he writes about.

Much of literary criticism of the twentieth century assumes a divide between author and narrator and between oral and written traditions. While generally these divisions are important to maintain, I argue that an absolute separation of these concepts or traditions limits an understanding of texts, like Andrews', that evoke oral forms. The recent discipline of Comparative Oral Traditions offers a useful theoretical framework to consider the possibility of intersections between the oral and the written.<sup>2</sup> John Miles Foley, in *How to Read an Oral Poem*, maintains that “the Great Divide [between written and oral traditions] is an invention that doesn't square with

reality, and that texts and oral poetry can peacefully coexist and even interact in interesting ways” (60). This coexistence of the text and the oral can be difficult to establish, particularly if we only have a text to examine. In these cases, Foley argues, we must provide two forms of evidence of the oral in written works: “direct accounts of how they were composed and performed on the one hand, and structural symptoms of oral composition and performance on the other” (46). I will use these two guidelines to establish the oral nature of Andrews’ novels. In this examination I do not mean to suggest that Andrews’ works are purely oral. Andrews wrote novels and considered himself a writer. Rather, by providing evidence of the oral in Andrews’ texts, I hope to establish that Andrews not only uses literary devices to approximate the oral, but actually participates in an oral tradition as he writes his books.

The “direct accounts” Foley calls for, while often anecdotal in the case of Andrews, are abundant. Most of the scholars who have written about Andrews’ work assume or directly argue that no line separates Andrews’ voice from the narrator of his novels. Those that knew Andrews insist that he was as much of an oral storyteller as he was a novelist. In Richard Bausch’s 1987 “Afterword” to the Brown Thrasher edition of *Appalachee Red*, he provides a remarkably simple explanation for the distinctive narrative voice in Andrews’ work: he insists that Andrews is the narrator. Bausch is very straightforward with his claim: “I don’t believe there is any reason to suppose that the speaker, sometimes idiosyncratic and bawdy and rambunctious, is not Andrews himself” (1987, 287). With this same certainty, Warren J. Carson reiterates Bausch’s claim in his discussion of *Appalachee Red* in *Masterpieces of African-American Literature*:

There is no doubt that the storyteller is the author—no adopted persona here—and that he not only knows the tale thoroughly but also understands its implications, appreciates its worth, and enjoys telling it. (1992, 11)

The matter-of-fact nature of these claims suggests the fact that Bausch and Carson were as familiar with Andrews as they were his works. Bausch confirms his relationship with Andrews in his “Afterword” (1987, 286). In my correspondence with Carson, he explains his statements about Andrews’ work:

my observations are based in part on an analysis of his works, primarily *Appalachee Red* and *Baby Sweet’s*, but mostly on my many conversations and interactions with the writer. He was an absolute hoot when it came to telling a story . . . and he had so many more than those he published.

Trudier Harris, in *South of Tradition: Essays on African American Literature*, also insists that Andrews is the narrator: “Andrews keeps readers constantly aware in *Appalachee Red* that he is narrating” (2002, 93). Although she did not know the author, her assessment is as unambiguous as Bausch’s or Carson’s. Andrews’ storytelling abilities are further confirmed in Jesse Freeman’s documentary, *Somebody Else, Somewhere Else: The Raymond Andrews Story* (2010). In the film, writers Tony Grooms, Gary Gildner, and Phillip Lee Williams; publisher Judy Long; and family members all tell stories of Andrews telling stories in classrooms, cotton fields, friends’ homes, and bars. Many of those interviewed in the film, as well as others who knew Andrews, attended a two-day tribute to the author hosted by the *Georgia Review* to celebrate their fall 2010 issue which featured some of Andrews’ unpublished correspondence and fiction. I must admit that, as someone who only knows Andrews through his written work, I was sometimes frustrated at this event because everyone else seemed to have an anecdote of Ray telling them a story and little time was devoted to the Raymond Andrews novels that I know so well.

The second form of evidence that Foley calls for, the “structural symptoms,” are easier to formally establish. Whether or not Andrews is literally the narrator, the narrative voice found in his novels is deeply rooted in oral tradition. Andrews’ novels are filled with examples of the literary devices that Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey*, uses to define the speakerly text,

the text in which all other structural elements seem to be devalued, as important as they remain to the telling of the tale, because the narrative strategy signals attention to its own importance, an importance which would seem to be the privileging of oral speech and its inherent linguistic features. (181)

The two devices that Gates associates with the speakerly text are *free indirect discourse* and *skaz*. *Free indirect discourse* is “marked by the grammar of third-person narration and the style, tone, and syntax of direct speech on the part of the character” (McCauley). Similarly, the Russian Formalist concept of *skaz* is used in instances with “a ‘narrator’ mediating between the author and the audience, [where] the story is told in such a manner as to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the ‘illusion of oral narration’” (Erllich 238). In all of Andrews’ novels, information is recounted through a third-person narrator. Although some of the characters in Andrews’ work speak in a heavier dialect than the narrator, the narrator shares the oral quality of their speech—in syntax, style, lexical patterns, rhythm, idiomatic words and phrases, and tone. In the following passage from *Baby Sweet’s*, the point of view is third-person omniscient, but the narrator is clearly not a removed or dispassionate observer:

Word was out! Motorcycle Momma was colored! Hallelujah, Lord, Lord! She—as talk lost no time whatsoever in stretching itself razor-blade thin up, down, and all around the back street and beyond—had strutted her stuff right into Baby Sweet’s that Independence Day high noon as the third whore and, despite her long straight blond hair and light skin, right off announced her color as colored and proclaimed black as “beautiful” by stating flat out to the white man John Morgan, Junior, that her body was “for colored only,” and if she wasn’t allowed to serve her own race with it there in Baby Sweet’s, then she would just get her hat and motor right out of Appalachee. And, man, talk just kept right on, from the moment she first strutted her stuff through that front door, John Morgan, Junior, Baby Sweet, and the whole damn whorehouse knew that this here Motorcycle Momma said exactly what she meant and, Lord, meant exactly what she said. Honey, hush! (Andrews 1988, 116)

The narrator is not a character and does not participate in the action of the novel. He does, however, participate in the same oral traditions as the characters. In this passage, he seems to be taking part in the very “talk” he is describing. In particular, his interjections emphasize that he, as much as any character, is capable of taking part in the gossip.

One year before the publication of *The Signifying Monkey*, Bausch, in his “Afterword” to *Appalachee Red*, describes Andrews’ narration in a strikingly similar manner as Gates’s explanation of the speakerly text:

Andrews seems to be standing at the window of his world, inviting us in and accompanying us through every stage of his story. [. . .] The point of view here is clearly omniscient, yet the gestures are colloquial, those of the spoken word. This is an angle of vision, a speech, that Andrews uses more blatantly in subsequent work, and I know of nothing quite like it in American literature. (1987, 288)

Although Bausch’s observation is very brief, the essence of his discussion parallels Gates’s. He does not reference literary devices such as *skaz* and *free indirect discourse*, but it is clear that he is pointing out the significance of a third-person omniscient narrator whose voice is decidedly oral. Bausch also insists that this approach to narration is rare. That he knew of “nothing quite like it in American literature,” suggests that he was unfamiliar with Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the novel Gates would declare, a year later, as the first example in African American literature of the speakerly text.

Gates’s concept rests on the idea of a text privileging the oral, and I contend that the privileging of the oral is

possible in Andrews' work because the narrative voice is based in the oral traditions of the folk characters that are being represented. Andrews' omniscient narrator knows what his characters know, like any omniscient narrator, but this knowing is possible because he is a part of the community. He is not an active participant in the action of his narrative; he is, however, an active participant in the culture and traditions of his characters. In Andrews' novels, examples of *skaz* and *free indirect discourse* do more than just capture "the style, tone, and syntax of direct speech on the part of the character" or "the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech." They demonstrate the narrator's empathy with the hopes, fears, joys, desires, and needs of the characters.

Written literary devices such as *skaz* and *free indirect discourse* are a part of Andrews' rhetorical strategy, but more importantly he incorporates into his narrative voice some of the speech practices of the African American communities he writes about. In particular, he includes *testifying* and *call and response*. Smitherman provides useful definitions of these terms. She explains that *testifying* is the "concept referring to a ritualized form of black communication in which the speaker gives verbal witness to the efficacy, truth, and power of some experience in which all blacks have shared" (1977, 58). *Call and response* is the "spontaneous verbal and no-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener" (1977, 104). This practice takes place in both the sacred and secular world and can easily be identified by the "responses," which take the form of words and phrases like "Amen!," "Lord, ha' mercy!," "Tell the truth!," and "Look out!" (1977, 106). Following these oral traditions, Andrews punctuates brief vignettes about people, events, or customs with similar *responses*, calling attention to his *testifying* and seeking witnesses to the truths that he is exclaiming.

Andrews' narrative voice combines these oral practices throughout his novels. Examples of his use of *testifying* and *call and response* are most apparent in *Baby Sweet's*, but they are also present in his other three works of fiction. An instance of this technique is found as the narrator recounts the story of how John Junior, who is the White son of the wealthiest family in town, learns that he has an older half-brother, Red, who is Black:

the hitchhiking man who on the first Thanksgiving Day after the end of the war had been picked up wearing an army uniform just outside of Athens by John Junior, brought back to Appalachee, which he'd left as a baby, and left at the foot of Morgan Hill to descend upon the town's backstreet, where for the next eighteen years among his momma's people—a former maid at Morgan Hill—he ruled the roost as Appalachee Red . . . this Red had been conceived atop Morgan Hill by the owner of the Hill himself, thus making him a Morgan man. Amen. (Andrews 1987, 190)

John Junior is shocked that his father had a child with the family's maid, but the fact that powerful White Southern men had children with "the help" is no revelation to the Black community. The *response*, "Amen," reminds the reader that the narrative is *testifying* to a truth that many in the White community would rather ignore. In another example, the narrator explains why Red's Café, a prominent Black-owned restaurant during segregation, had come into hard times:

Integration had also done its part in breaking up "Nigger's Saturday Night" by opening up many jobs in factories, stores, and offices throughout the area that had never been held by blacks before and to which most of these workers commuted in the cars they were now able to buy as a result of having such jobs. So what it all came down to was that if an Appalachee nigger felt a taste for a barbequed rib coming on, he could hop in his car and drive the sixty or so miles into Atlanta on the brand-new expressway to get it (although it just might be a frozen rib), along with anything else—burgers, dogs, pizza, fried chicken. . . and something called "steak"—his money could buy and still get back home that same night. Yes, Lord, the big cities done gone and stolen the little towns' Saturday night. Have mercy! (Andrews 1987, 10)

This partial explanation of the downfall of Red's Café includes comments on the mixed results of integration, the pleasures (and drawbacks) of eating restaurant food, and the freedom that money allows. "Have mercy!" demands that these issues are important to consider beyond the development of the plot.

Examples of *skaz* and *free-indirect discourse* in Andrews' novels are arguably literary devices the author uses to appropriate an oral voice. Andrews' use of *testifying* and *call and response*, however, come from an oral tradition, not a literary one. This distinction is significant because the "structural symptoms" that mark his fiction as oral go well beyond the dialect of the characters or the narrator. As Phillip Lee Williams, a friend of Andrews and one of his earliest publishers, explains in his 1988 "Afterword" to the Brown Thrasher edition of *Baby Sweet's*, Andrews "approaches these tales not as the novelist but as the storyteller. . . . His traditions are not literary but oral, and unashamedly so" (214). Andrews is immersed in a Black oral storytelling tradition that guides his narrative strategies, and these strategies may confuse a reader looking for the literary. Smitherman provides an explanation of one aspect of this tradition:

Black English speakers will render their general, abstract observations about life, love, people in the form of a concrete narrative. . . . This meandering away from the "point" takes the listener on episodic journeys and over tributary rhetorical routes, but like the flow of nature's rivers and streams, it all eventually leads back to the source. Though highly applauded by blacks, this narrative linguistic style is exasperating to whites who wish you'd be direct and hurry up and get to the point. (1977, 147–48)

Because Andrews has so many stories to tell, he often "meanders" away from the "point" of the larger narratives he creates. These digressions do eventually lead back to the plot, but because they are so frequent, the plot often seems less important than the detours Andrews takes along the way.

Williams argues that, "because Andrews' voice is that of the storyteller, his books often don't seem like novels" (1988, 214). For some, this is troublesome. "A first time reader," Williams explains, may find Andrews' novels "rambling and even, at times, inchoate" (1988, 214). A reader who comes to his work with certain literary expectations may be let down or confused. Bausch admits that he was initially baffled by Andrews' first novel:

Appalachee Red breaks with one tradition as it embraces another, older one. When I first read it I kept looking for scenes—dramatic moments rendered in dialogue and action through the vaguely ironic, if not self-effacing, voice that the modern reader has come to expect in fiction. I was wrong to spend more than the first five minutes expecting the voice to be anything but what it was, of course, and being wrong prevented me from seeing Appalachee Red on its own terms. The result was a kind of frustration: there was wonderful energy in the book, and people in it were marvelously vivid as people; yet I kept thinking what they might be if given scenes by themselves. Consequently, I was not up to the rich pleasures this novel contains. (1987, 286-87)

Bausch recognizes that he came to *Appalachee Red* with the wrong expectations. Because he approached the novel from a literary perspective, he initially could not appreciate the rich storytelling tradition found in Andrews' work.

Throughout all of his novels, Andrews provides descriptions of Southern Black culture that often steer the narrative away from the storyline. In doing so, Andrews performs his role as griot. Though he does follow "who did what when," he seems more interested in developing "word-pictures of the culture, belief, ethics, and values" of the Southern Black communities he writes about. Andrews might devote an entire chapter giving the history of a character who only plays a minor role, or he may spend a page setting the table at a church dinner. From a strictly literary perspective, this refusal to stay on task is frustrating. Sometimes these character histories and cultural explanations help further the plot; sometimes they don't seem to have a reason for being there except Andrews is having a good time talking about it. Andrews does have plots in his novels, but he is often more interested in the day to day lives of the characters he creates. As much as he is concerned with Red's revenge in *Appalachee Red* or the last days of the town's matriarch in *Rosiebelle Lee Wildcat Tennessee* or the opening night of Appalachee's first whorehouse in *Baby Sweet's*, he is concerned with the foods his characters eat, the



songs they sing, and all the other cultural variables that shape their lives.

Food plays a significant role in shaping human action, and much of the community life in the South centers on the preparation and eating of cultural dishes. For Andrews' small town of *Appalachee*, the hog is of central importance. Red's cafe brings the community together with a "menu specialized in the anatomy of the pig." According to one's tastes or pocketbook, the cook "in one way or another prepared for the pork-loving customers the animal's head, back, shoulders, sides, hams, legs, feet, kidneys, liver, tail, guts, nuts, skin, and bones. The only thing that escaped Sam's kitchen was the grunt and the fart" (1987, 21). Andrews' elucidation on the pig's anatomy suggests a community that cannot afford to waste its resources. His discussion of the grunt and the fart suggests they have a sense of humor. In this example, the information he supplies does tell the reader something about the characters and the restaurant where much of *Appalachee Red* takes place, but it adds little to the plot. We learn nothing of Red's mysterious past or his plans for the future. Despite its irrelevance to the main story, Andrews wants to tell us about what his characters eat.

The following passage from *Rosiebelle Lee Wildcat Tennessee* provides a more detailed account of Southern culinary fare:

Immediately following the indoor services—climaxed by the joining of new members into the church and afterwards quickly cooled down by the collection taken up for the preacher—came the spread, and the members of every family, Christian and sinner alike, sat down on the grass outside and broke bread together, elbow to elbow. Besides bread, biscuits, and hoecakes, broken, chewed, or gummed down, all kinds of animals and fowl contributed to the spread, cooked in their own fashion—the rabbit, squirrel, possum, coon, cow, chicken, turkey, duck, and goose. The pig alone gave up its ears, jowls, tongue, brain, neck, back, shoulders, hams, loins, sausages, chitlings, chops, cracklings, heart, liver, kidneys, ribs, feet, knuckles, tail, rump, butt, and balls—everything, as the saying went, but the fart and the squeal. All of this meat went well with whole heaps of baked, boiled, fried, stewed, or raw butter beans, snapped peas, blackeyed peas, English peas, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, sweet corn, cabbage, kale, collard greens, mustard greens, turnip greens, poke salad, turnips, beets, carrots, rutabagas, rice, okra, pumpkins, squash, onions, scallions, tomatoes, bell peppers, hot peppers, cucumbers, radishes, eggs, butter, dumplings, and stuffing. All sweetened by apple, blackberry, dewberry, mulberry, cherry, peach, pear, plum, pumpkin, and sweet potato pies, chocolate cakes and cocoanut, cupcakes and teacakes and shortening bread, cantaloupe, and watermelon, and all washed down with gallons of buttermilk and lemonade. (25)

This long list suggests that Andrews wants the reader to feel as if they are about to partake in this meal. But the passage is gratuitous for the reader who is simply looking for plot development. The extended menu Andrews presents us with seems like a digression from the main story until we realize that the novel is as much about culture as it is about anything else. In case the reader did not read his first novel, Andrews repeats the importance of the hog in this passage, and only slightly revises his grunt and fart joke. Andrews often repeats information, seemingly because he relishes the telling of it. He also wants to make sure his readers know the culture of the rural Black South.

Songs are also found throughout Andrews' works. Simply flipping through any of his novels one finds lyrics interspersed with the text. Sometimes they are relevant to the plot, but just as often they seem to be showing off Andrews' knowledge of music. He presents us with examples of spirituals, the blues, soul music, and folk songs. In *Appalachee Red*, Baby Sweet is introduced as she dances to the chants of clapping teenagers:

Put yo' hands on yo' hips  
'n let yo' backbone slip,  
shake it to the East,  
shake it to the west,

shake it to the very one  
you love the best. (1987, 78)

The song Andrews provides us with does serve to further the plot. Because of her sensual dance, Baby Sweet must run away to escape one White man's sexual abuse and ends up the unwilling mistress of the brutal Clyde "Boots" White. But the tone of the song and dance is celebratory. Andrews unflinchingly details the appalling consequences of a beautiful young Black woman expressing her newly-found sexuality, but there is no moral lesson here. Andrews wants us to hear the song that Baby Sweet dances to, not simply to heighten the tragedy that follows, but because of the joy that the characters experience in singing and watching. At the end of the novel Andrews brings in a spiritual to heighten the tension at Little Bit's funeral. The "Sanctified sisters" begin to sing as the church falls into tumult:

O sinner, you kin run to de mount'n.  
O sinner, you kin run to de river,  
But you can't git away, you can't git away!

As the events become more chaotic, more congregants join in the song:

You kin run to yo' momma,  
You kin run to yo' daddy.  
In this instance, the spiritual is clearly connected to the plot. As the church sings, Roxanne Morgan is overcome with lust for her half-brother, Red, marking the end of segregation. The scene ends with the repeated line, But you can't git away,  
You can't git away (1987, 279–82).  
All that is left in the novel is a brief epilogue.

In the two novels following *Appalachee Red*, Andrews increases his use of lyrics. Throughout *Rosiebelle Lee Wildcat Tennessee*, Tampa Red records play on the Victrola. "You're Gonna Miss Me When I'm Gone" fills the room as Rosiebelle Lee's White lover, Mister Mac, comes to see her on her deathbed. "No Matter How She Done It" plays as the men and boys of Appalachee stop what they are doing to appreciate young Doris Virginia's walk:

The cop brought her in,  
She needed no bail.  
At the judge she shook her tail,  
And he had the cop thrown in jail.  
No matter how she done it,  
She done it just the same. (1988, 124)

The song serves as a soundtrack for this weekly ritual, but the lyrics don't further the plot any more than the accompanying discussion of Doris Virginia's derriere. Lines from the "The Boll Weevil Blues" occur near the beginning and end of the novel, signaling the demise of the Old South. In *Baby Sweet's*, James Brown's "It's a Man's Man's World" plays on a transistor radio as Leroy Rogers is unable to perform certain masculine duties. On the opening night of *Baby Sweet's*, Lea sings "The Lonesome Atlanta Blues" and "The Dirt Road Blues." She also sings the entirety of a version of "The Signifying Monkey" as tensions rise in the brothel's lounge.

The list of cultural factors that Andrews presents also includes religion, gender roles, language practices, work, entertainment, clothing, taboos, and education. He often breaks from the plot to describe in detail a dance, a

game, or a job. Each factor adds another dimension to the complexity of the community. As a storyteller and griot, Andrews is more interested in his characters and their everyday lives than he is in one storyline. The oral tradition informs more than just the voice of the narrator or characters, it provides a narrative strategy that allows Andrews to explore the social history of his Southern Black communities. This approach may be confusing from a written literary perspective, but the reader of Andrews' novels must remember that the plot is not necessarily what his books are about.

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## Notes

1 Alex Haley has also been labeled "a Southern griot" and "the griot from Tennessee." See Helen Taylor, "The Griot form Tennessee': The Saga of Alex Haley's *Roots*," *Critical Quarterly* 37.2 (1995): 46–62.<sup>2</sup> For this brief discussion, I use the work of John Miles Foley, the founder of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri and the academic journal *Oral Tradition*. I must point out that Foley insists that novels cannot be "wholly oral" (56, 42). However, while Foley understands that on the surface novels are "presumably among the most textual and literary of species and therefore the 'least oral,'" he argues that "that presumption turns out not to be true" as some literary traditions "have their roots sunk deep in oral poetry" (148).



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