

# “But One Generation Removed from Extinction”: Folklore Studies and the Mitigation of Precarity

**ABSTRACT:** Conditions of precarity are those in which the overwhelming needs of the present override the ability of a person, community, or state to materially anticipate or account for the future. Precarity can be fiscal, social, or political, and often more than one of these at a time. Folklorists have very rarely taken precarity per se as a topic of interest, but folklore both as an academic discipline and as a form of popular expression has been driven since its origins to mitigate precarity. This article reflects on three important moments in the history of folklore: the work of the Grimms, the Finnish nationalist movement, and the Irish Folklore Commission, and addresses how each of them was motivated by the desire to manage and mitigate precarity among vulnerable communities. Then, it reviews the impact of the Hampton Folklore Society and outlines how its engagements with the American Folklore Society foreshadow contemporary tensions in folklore.

I WRITE THIS from the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a peculiar moment to be writing about precarity; were this a novel, and not a scholarly paper, I might be accused of a lack of subtlety. “Precarity” is a close cousin of “vulnerability,” and these days, much social order—both the institutional and vernacular kinds—seems to revolve around the mitigation of vulnerabilities. Of course, at the center of popular consciousness is our physical vulnerability: the deadly spread of the virus has caused some of us to confront our own mortality, while others continue to insist that our bodies are not as vulnerable as scientists and medical experts would have us believe. We

are experiencing economic vulnerability: all stock market indices have fallen to multiyear lows and many people have lost income and jobs as the virus has disrupted trade and forced many consumer outlets to close. We experience the vulnerability of isolation and loneliness as governments impose lockdown orders that can penalize adults for coming within six feet of each other in public.

In these conditions of extreme uncertainty, coping is a cultural practice. The internet is rife with COVID-19 folk remedies. In Mexico, information circulated about a cure made from boiled garlic; in Afghanistan, the miracle cure was two cups of black tea. In the United States, folk belief has centered less on cures than on the disease itself, with the virus derided as a hoax or attributed to the rollout of 5G mobile internet technology, though miracle cures like bleach and hydroxychloroquine were promoted by President Trump and circulated widely among his supporters.

There is tragic irony to the fact that Italy, among the first nations to be devastated by COVID-19, is also the nation that popularized the term “precario” in the 1980s. They created a body for precarity, too: the tongue-in-cheek San Precario, a patron saint in a uniform polo t-shirt and cargo pants. A prayer to him includes invocations to “give us paid leave and pension contributions” and “remember those souls whose contract is coming to an end, tortured by the pagan divinities: the Free Market and Flexibility” (van der Linden 2014, 9).<sup>1</sup>

In an essay called “The Arrowmaker,” N. Scott Momaday tells and describes a story that came to him through his family’s oral tradition. The Arrowmaker, he says, is “a tenuous link in that most ancient chain of language which we call the oral tradition; tenuous because the tradition itself appears to be so, for as many times as the story has been told, it has always been but one generation removed from extinction” (Momaday 1997, 10). The choice of the word “extinction” is both intentional and powerful, connoting not just an ending but a death, and not just of one life but an entire lineage. If we consider that, per Alan Dundes, “the critical issue in defining ‘folk’ is, what groups in fact have traditions?” the connotation of death becomes clearer: the demise of a tradition is also the demise of the folk group that practiced it (Dundes 1969, 13n34). Momaday and Dundes both invite us to consider how traditions do not end by themselves: they end because something has ended them, and their demise weakens or fragments the communities that sustained them.

We turn to our cultures to help us manage the unpredictable. We create traditions to exert a sense of control when we feel powerless. Indeed, the concept of precarity is bound up in the concept of control: to exist in a condition of precarity is to exist in a condition wherein the scope of a person or community's control over their situation—physical, biological, financial, familial, political—is limited to the present and immediate future, and excludes the long-term future. If you are clinging to the edge of a cliff, all resources available to you become devoted to keeping yourself from falling, and it becomes impossible to think about what you might do later in the event that you find your way back up into safety.

Articulated this way, the connection between folklore and precarity seems intuitive. But when this article was presented as a paper at the American Folklore Society Annual Meeting in 2019, keyword searches of “folklore” and “precarity” in the major journals and presses of our field turned up a single article by Katherine Borland (2017) and a handful of book reviews. A few more publications have appeared since then—Magdalena Buchzyk (2020) discusses how groups of vulnerable women use craft to cultivate a sense of certainty in uncertain, precarious lives, and Puja Batra-Wells discusses vernacular strategies used to mitigate economic precarity among visual artists in Columbus, Ohio (2019). But still, folklore has been slow to explicitly embrace the language and theory of precarity compared to many adjacent fields such as anthropology, literature, sociology, and political science.

The goal of this article is to make the case that the mitigation of precarity has always been a central motivator of folklore production. My use of the word “folklore” intentionally encompasses both folklore-as-content and folklore-as-discipline. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has asserted, “the use of one and the same term for the discipline and its subject contributes to the illusion that the subject precedes the discipline and not the other way around. Disciplines make their subjects and in the process make themselves” (1996, 245). The cocreation of folklore as subject and object was done with political purpose. This article will describe how four foundational projects in folklore’s early history were all grounded, in different ways, in the management of and mitigation of precarity. It will first assess different definitions of the concept of precarity and provide an overview of the ways folklore, and concepts central to it like “group” and “tradition,” are linked to these definitions. Then, it will outline the ways the work

of four major folklore projects and communities were tied to the mitigation of precarities particular to their time and place: the work of the Grimms, the Finnish Fennoman movement, early Irish folklorists, and the Hampton Folklore Society. Through this review, folklore will emerge as not just a tool used to manage precarity, but a marker of moments when economies of precarity sat on the crux of significant change.

## Precarity and Precariousness

Reflecting on the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, Judith Butler describes the term “precarity” as related to, but not identical with, “precariousness” (2006). Precariousness refers to what anthropologist Clara Han calls a “common ontological condition of exposure” (2018, 333): it refers to the vulnerability entailed by collective, universal human interdependence. Precarity refers to the inequities with which precariousness is distributed: some people, nations, and cultures are “less grievable,” or more expendable, than others. Butler illustrates the dynamic by asking: “Will those hundreds of thousands of Muslim lives lost in the last decades ever receive the equivalent to the paragraph-long obituaries in the *New York Times* that seek to humanize—often through nationalist and familial framing devices—those Americans who have been violently killed?” (2006, 12). Systems of oppression, prejudice, the inequitable distribution of capital, and visibility on a global scale are all dimensions of precarity. Thus, precarity “names both the necessity and the difficulty of ethics” (Butler 2012, 141) by reflecting the extent to which people see or deny in each other full personhood and a shared, complete humanity.

This definition of precarity is an intentional departure from definitions that tie precarity directly to contemporary neoliberalism (see Schram 2015; Gatling this issue; Gordon and Gatling this issue). I align myself with Marissia Frakou against arguments that frame neoliberal precarity as a unique crisis, or “a state of exception and an unprecedented emergency of huge magnitude,” because “this approach presents a myopic and linear view as it frames ‘crisis’ as something which can be measured, controlled and resolved; in addition, it conceals connections between what constitutes a ‘current crisis’ to several other ‘crises’ throughout history” (2019, 4–5). Quoting Isabell Lorey and Lauren Berlant, Frakou argues that “precarity has now been democratized, becoming ‘crisis when [it] hit the bourgeoisies’”

(Fragkou 2019, 5, quoting Puar 2012). In other words, neoliberal precarity is new because neoliberalism is new, and because it has visited upon bourgeois, white, male, and middle- and upper-middle class populations the inequitable distribution of precariousness that has long been familiar to marginalized groups.

Precarity “designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. . . . Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection” (Butler 2009, 25). It rests on the assumption that viability is a finite quality to which some have greater access than others; existing in a condition of precarity involves understanding our own security—either as individuals or as groups—as existing at the expense of others, and that others’ security comes at the expense of our own. In that sense, it is a boundary-making condition. Folklore insulates us against precarity by strengthening our social networks and differentiating a category of “them,” which is made up of people or institutions who embody risk or threat, from “us,” made up of people who insulate each other against risk and threat.

Strong communities, connected by traditions, mitigate precariousness for their members. They feed and house each other, support each other financially to the best of their ability in times of need, and help each other to care for children and the elderly, creating vernacular safety nets when institutional infrastructure fails to satisfy survival needs. These vernacular safety nets require a sense of community whose members value each other and a sense of temporal continuity that allows individuals, families, and communities to feel confident in their ability to persist through (or prevent) change. Folklore, the stuff of traditions and folk groups and community building, was created for the purpose of accomplishing all of these things.

## Germany: The Birth of Romantic Nationalism

Roger D. Abrahams wryly asserts that “the narrative of the birth of folkloristics is built upon certain legends of national origin” (1993, 8). These legends are entangled with nationalist movements, for “[Folklorists] have been involved in a politics of culture for a very

long time. This politics has rested on the need to assert that there is something natural about the human community and its attachment to particular bodies of land" (1993, 5). The first of these legends centers Johann Gottfried Herder's eighteenth-century romantic nationalism; the second, William Thoms's nineteenth-century coining of the term "Folk-Lore." This dichotomy is not an opposition but a question of proximate and distal causes: Thoms, in the very letter where he coins the term "Folk-Lore," extolls as a model the work of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, who were in turn motivated by Herder's romantic nationalist call-to-arms (Thoms 1846). The spirit of Herder is evident in Thoms's writing; Thoms's preference for the "good Saxon compound" of "Folk-lore" over the Latinate "Popular Antiquities" echoes Herder's desire to foreground German-language *Volkspoesie* over the Latinate French that was, at the time, the preferred language of German aristocracy and intelligentsia (Wilson 2006a).

Insofar as the field of folklore studies has, since its incipience, been bound up in questions of nationalism, it has been bound up in the process of mitigating precarity, or at least the perception of precarity. In Butler's words:

Whether explicitly stated or not, every political effort to manage populations involves a tactical distribution of precarity, more often than not articulated through an unequal distribution of precarity, one that depends on dominant norms regarding whose life is grievable and worth protecting and whose life is ungrievable, or marginally or episodically grievable and so, in that sense, already lost in part or in whole, and thus less worthy of protection and sustenance. (2012, 148)

Nationalism is, of course, a political effort to manage populations, and folklore contributes to the tactical distribution of precarity. Benedict Anderson, in his foundational discussion of nationalism, reflected precisely Herder's era when he argued that European nationalism arose during the Enlightenment at "the dusk of religious modes of thought . . . What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning" ([2006] 2016, 11).

Herder saw nationalism as an essential component of meaning-making in human lives, and he saw folklore—both its production and its documentation—as central to nationalism. The intrusion of the values, cultures, and language of one nation into the people and

territory amounted to a developmental interruption dangerous to survival. William A. Wilson glosses Herder's ideology thus: "should the continuity of a nation's development be interrupted, the only road to salvation lies in collecting the folk poetry surviving from the time of the break, using it to restore to the nation its national soul, and thus making possible its future development on its own foundation" (2006a, 123). The alternative to "salvation" by folk creation is to surrender to a fate which, in Herder's words, "We poor Germans have been destined from the beginning never to be ourselves, always the lawgivers and servants of foreign nations, the directors of their fate and their bartered, bleeding, impoverished slaves" (Wilson 2006a, 117). The language in this statement, with its reference to bartering, impoverishment, and slavery, invokes a precapitalist precursor to neoliberal precarity, while the emphasis on "salvation" and the idea of natural development invokes the bodily vulnerability emphasized by Butler. The German people sat on the precipice of two possible futures with their very personhood and identity caught in the balance, Herder argued, and only through folklore could they seize a measure of control over which of those futures became real. In this respect, both the creation of folk expression and the documentation of it were central to the assertion of collective, national control over national futures; their absence implied precarity and the potential for disappearance, and their presence reaffirmed survival and stability. This ideology went on to inform many folklorists driven by the desire to mitigate the precarity enshrined by political systems built on domination, and thus the navigation of domination and marginality became central to our field.

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were inspired by Herder to collect the folksongs and folktales of the various duchies, principalities, and kingdoms of the Holy Roman Empire during its collapse. Valerie Paradiż points out that the "most vibrant and exciting period in the history of how the Grimm tales came into being . . . dramatically coincide[s] with the rise and fall of the regime of Napoleon Bonaparte" (2009, xii–xiii), which invaded and crumbled the solidarity of the states that made up the German Empire and the Holy Roman Empire more broadly. In particular, Napoleon renamed the Grimms' home of Hesse as Westphalia and instilled as its leader his own incompetent brother Jérôme, who "proceeded to alienate the citizens of the former Hesse with a courtly lavishness that typified the corrupt culture of the Bonapartes" (Paradiż 2009, 36).

The political unrest of the Grimms' homeland thrust them into a condition of political precarity. They could not predict, nor account for, what their homeland and home life would become in the face of this radical reconstruction of their civic landscape; in Paradiž's words, "many things that meant home and tradition began to disappear before their eyes" (2009, 36). The perception of threat to the Hessian way of life under French occupation drove the Grimms to document and seek continuity in "words, language, and the optimistic concept of the *Volk*" (2009, 37). Jacob, in particular, thought the first edition of *Kinder und Haüsmarchen* preserved an important and endangered dimension of German culture in the context of French conquest and the loss of Hessian autonomy; this was one of the reasons he initially resisted pressure to modify the tales to make them more suitable for children (Hettinga 2001, 78).<sup>2</sup>

The Grimms viewed the documentation and distribution of folk narratives as a means to create a sense of continuity in the face of terrifying political and cultural change borne first by the Napoleonic army as it invaded eastward, and then by the Russian army that drove Napoleon back toward the west. They knew that even following the withdrawal of conquering militaries, the civic, civil, and political structures of their world would not return to the "normal" of their youth. Folk culture, with its invocation of longevity, entextualized and performed a historic resistance to cultural oppression. In a moment of national precarity its documentation and preservation insured a sense of continuity into an unpredictable future.

### Finland: The Fennoman Movement

Around the same time that the Grimms were documenting their tales, the Finnish War was underway. The historic name of this war is misleading; while it took place largely on Finland's geographical land, the warring factions were Sweden, which had held Finland under imperial rule since the Middle Ages, and Russia, which sought to annex the region. Russia won, and Finland became an autonomous Grand Principality within the Russian Empire. Tsar Alexander I was fairly liberal in his governance of Finland, returning to it land that Russia had annexed in the eighteenth century and allowing it a great deal of autonomy. But in the years leading up to his death in 1825, high-level Russian aristocrats criticized his liberalism, and after he passed away, they initiated an aggressive program of Russification in the region (Wilson 2006b).

It is not coincidental or surprising that Fennomania, the Finnish nationalist movement, arose during this era. Explicitly political Finnish nationalism was oppressed by both Sweden and Russia, and “the one area in which the Finns were free to develop their own sense of nationality was the cultural” (Barton 2009, 169). Among the greatest achievement of the Fennomans was the publication of the *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic, by Fennoman Elias Lönnrot; previously, the *Kalevala* had existed only in fragmented oral tradition (Sommer 2016). In this period of political instability and vulnerability, the Fennomans turned to their folk traditions to provide evidence of their resilience: in Wilson’s words, “A nation that had created the *Kalevala*, they repeatedly told themselves, was not destined to die” (1975, 131). When centuries of Swedish colonial rule could only be brought to an end by the incursion of a new tyrant, the Finns, violently buffeted by the winds of regional geopolitics, saw in their folklore an anchor that rooted them in place.

In colonized Finland, Sweden and Russia maintained domination in part by devaluing Finnish people by devaluing Finnish language and culture. Sweden’s leaders justified their perception of Finnish inferiority by pointing to the lack of any great works of Finnish literature; they forced the upper classes and high-level functionaries to conduct all governance in Swedish. The result: “a Finnish peasant seeking justice in a court of law had to listen to his case argued in a language he did not comprehend” (Wilson 2006b, 127). There is, perhaps, no better illustration of an inequitable distribution of grievability than the image of a person deprived of the capacity to engage in their own criminal trial. When Lönnrot published the *Kalevala* in 1835, it stood as a testament to Finnish national longevity that pre-existed Swedish rule.<sup>3</sup> It proved the Finnish capacity to create great literature and therefore justified Finnish personhood, which in turn was the foundation for political autonomy that validated that personhood. Wilson quotes Finnish editorialist Kansalliseepoksista: “When we think of the great value of the *Kalevala* . . . we believe that a nation which was able in early times to create such a work of genius cannot succumb as it fights on behalf of its culture, its language, *and its being*” (Wilson 2006b, emphasis mine). The persistence of the story across time implies an enduring possibility for Finland to project itself into the future.

The story of the *Kalevala* does not end with its publication. While there was broad celebration upon its publication, scholars almost

immediately began to debate its authenticity, questioning how much of the text had been written by Lönnrot rather than collected by him (Antonnen 2015). But this did not impact the perception of the publication as a national achievement on behalf of Finland, nor did it impact Kaarle Krohn's ability to use the text as the foundation for the development of the historic-geographic method in folklore studies, setting the standard for the comparative practices that would define folklore studies for decades to follow.

## Ireland: English Antiquarianism and the Irish Folklore Commission

Mícheál Briody (2008) argues that while folklore collection in northern and continental Europe was driven by nationalism, and collection in England and France, whose nationhoods were well-established, was driven by antiquarianism, Ireland straddled both traditions, colonially influenced by English practices while in a state of nation building more analogous to places like Germany or Finland. Irish nationalists used Irish folklore documentation as a foundation for the assertion of a strong Irish national character capable of political sovereignty. Clare O'Halloran describes how early Irish ethnography and ethnology was conducted by Protestants and, most often, English settlers. English colonists used Irish folklore as illustration of Irish savagery and therefore as justification for increased colonial presence and governance. The ethnographic component of Edmund Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, for example, was explicitly curated to focus on "such customes of the Irish as seeme offensive and repugnant to the good government of the realme" and which therefore justified increased English military intervention as a necessary component of quashing barbarism (O'Halloran 2012, 194–95).

Spenser wrote in the late 1500s, but the early work of Irish antiquarian Thomas Crofton Croker following the 1798 Rebellion and the Act of Union in 1800 shared elements of his ethos. While Croker acknowledged the brutality of English dominion over Ireland, and his two-volume *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* did not explicitly foreground the elements of Irish folklore he considered to be barbaric, he did argue that Irish traditions were evidence of the failure of Protestant salvation doctrines to take root on the island. He also claimed that the documentation of Irish folk traditions would

serve to hasten their decline by drawing (English, Protestant) attention to them. Spenser asserted that his work was apolitical, perhaps out of necessity to maximize its reach and sales, but it bore at least the implicit purpose of hoping to help avert a second rebellion by simultaneously portraying the Irish as noble savages and by asserting the need for a strong, if kind, English hand in the region (O'Halloran 2012, 203–4).

Both Spenser and Croker saw in Irish folklore the tools for more effective continued subjugation of the Irish by the English. Particularly during Croker's time, Irish nationalist movements threatened the stability of English dominion. Threat to the status quo highlighted the precariousness of the Irish upper classes and the English who benefited from the upward colonial flow of money and goods. O'Halloran stresses that while Croker was Irish, his target audience was English; it follows, then, that his portrayal of Irish folklore would be intended to reinforce English perceptions of Irish people.

Of course, Irish nationalist movements also used folklore as a tool to invigorate a sense of communal identity among the Irish who had so long been colonized. Not long after Croker published *Fairy Legends*, Irish nationalist Thomas Davis argued that "Ireland must be unsaxonized before it can be pure and strong" (Briody 2008, 38), a cry taken up by Douglas Hyde who, fifty years later, gave a lecture titled "The De-Anglicization of Ireland," and then a year after that, held the inaugural gathering of what would become the Gaelic League. The league was founded in a spirit of antisectarianism, wherein Catholics and Protestants could come together to foster the growth of the Irish language at the height of Irish Home Rule, but it came to be dominated by Catholics and subservient to—or at the very least, conjoined with—republican, separatist political movements (Garvin 1987). In the romantic nationalist spirit, the Irish-speaking rural and coastal peasantry were perceived to be the least "saxonized" people of the country, and therefore their songs and stories could provide insight into what pure, decolonized Irish identity might look like. During the decades following the Irish War of Independence and the establishment of the Irish Free State, Seamus Ó Duilearga founded the Irish Folklore Commission, driven by both salvage-oriented and nationalistic agendas. In strengthening and reinvigorating traditions, he saw the capacity for Irish identity to persist through upheaval, the promise of continuity in a moment of precariousness created by thrilling, frightening, and unpredictable change.

## The United States: The Hampton Folklore Institute

In the United States, the relationship between folklore and the mitigation of precarity is particularly evident in the work of the Hampton Folklore Society and its many affiliated Black intellectuals. The Hampton Folklore Society was based at the Hampton Institute, which was a school devoted to the Reconstruction-era education of freed slaves and the precursor of present-day Hampton University. Pinned beneath a white supremacist social order, Black Americans had been freed from slavery but offered few material resources for self-sufficiency, placing them in a condition of economic precarity whose legacy persists to this day. At the core of the white supremacist ethos stood (and stands) the fundamental denial of full Black personhood. Political power remained in the hands of a white majority that viewed Black lives, and Black suffering, as not grievable. Economic and ontological precarity intertwined: the systemic denial of full personhood on the part of the white government and ruling classes justified the suppression of economic growth for Black people, and the absence of economic stability for Black families justified the denial of their full personhood. Discussions of Black folklore were not central to the broader discussion of how to assert Black personhood, but they did play a significant role. Shirley Moody-Turner emphasizes that many leading Black intellectuals at the time, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, and Robert Moton, were directly or indirectly affiliated with the Hampton Folklore Society and were “experimenting with new understandings of folklore and culture while remaining deeply cognizant of the politics of racial representation in the years surrounding the *Plessy* decision” (2013, 74).<sup>4</sup>

During this era, the predominant philosophy for the betterment of the lives of African American people was one of racial uplift, which tasked highly educated or otherwise elite Black people to educate and “elevate” other Black people; it implied that the greatest arbiter of Black cultural success was its approximation of white culture. Engagement with folklore was central to this philosophy, though different people found it relevant in different ways. The Hampton Folklore Society was founded by Alice Bacon, one of the Hampton Institute’s white teachers, who forged connections with the newly established American Folklore Society and its inaugural president, William Wells Newell. But its members and analysts were drawn from among Hampton Institute students, who challenged Bacon’s desire

to focus on the “scientific,” taxonomic approach to folklore studies that was common among academic folklorists of the time, preferring to consider the role folklore played in memory and situated relationships (Moody-Turner 2013, 15). The taxonomic approach, which sought to document Black folk traditions as survivals, was a salvage mission that would stand as evidence of Black cultural evolution and “improvement.” Not unlike the English motivation for documenting Irish folklore, the value of the documentation of Black folklore in the eyes of white academics and some Black intellectuals was, at least in part, to document its backwardness and to facilitate its removal from living tradition. It was a process of both saving and excising an element of culture that was perceived to contribute to Black inferiority. But the Hampton folklorists themselves, and some Black intellectuals close to them, saw in African American folklore not the survivals of an undeveloped culture but the foundation upon which a new Black culture could and must be built.

Robert Moton, who would later follow Booker T. Washington as the President of the Tuskegee Institute, was a leader among the Hampton folklorists. He “contest[ed] the popularly held belief that black folklore . . . [is] essentially imitative [and] confront[ed] the notion that black folklore . . . is representative of black difference and inferiority” (Moody-Turner 2013, 79). The interactions between the Hampton and AFS folklorists illustrate a precarious tension on the part of both parties. When Moton, with fellow Hampton members Frank Banks, William Daggs, and J. H. Wainwright, presented a paper on Black folksongs at an early AFS meeting, the AFS membership treated them more as informants than scholars; interest in their analysis was trumped by the desire to find a gramophone to record their performances. Moody-Turner describes Moton’s ability to speak the language of the white AFS folklorists, crafting an impression of himself as a detached scholar taking folksongs to be his “subject,” which stresses the intentionality of his divergence from that rhetoric. He blurred the categories of scholar and performer, theory and performance. The AFS members, including such greats as Newell and Franz Boas, were likely so blinded by the *de facto* racism of the time that the idea of accepting Moton’s analytical frameworks as a viable alternative to their own would not have crossed their minds. Their dismissal of them, treating Moton and his colleagues as tradition-bearers (objects of study, inferiors) rather than scholars (agents of critical thought, peers), was a reinforcement of their own superiority and of

the validity of their nascent, precarious discipline in the white world of university academics.

W. E. B. Du Bois was not a member of the Hampton Folklore Society, but he was good friends with Moton and was familiar with their work. He saw Black folksongs and spirituals, in particular, as evidence of the depth and potential of Black culture, and therefore of the potential carried by Black people if given the resources to tap into that potential:

The silently growing assumption of this age is that the probation of races is past, and that the backward races of to-day are of proven inefficiency and not worth the saving. Such an assumption is the arrogance of peoples irreverent toward Time and ignorant of the deeds of men . . . shall this nation proclaim its ignorance and unhallowed prejudices by denying freedom of opportunity to those who brought the Sorrow Songs to the Seats of the Mighty? (Du Bois 1903, ch. 14)

Du Bois threaded quotes from slave songs and African American spirituals through every chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, asserting that “the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas” (Du Bois 1903, ch. 14). These folksongs, Du Bois said, stood as a testament to the expressive potential inherent to African American culture, and should act as a motivator for investment in African American people: a bolstering of stability for people whose lives were precarious. Slave songs were evidence of grief and grievability. The absence of a great Black American civilization, he argued, was due not to the lack of an inherently civilized nature, but to oppression.

Du Bois’s arguments invited a reconsideration of evolutionary models of culture but did not refute them; his view of white and Black cultures was a hierarchical one, though he argued that this hierarchy of cultures did not reflect a hierarchy of people or of personhood. Scholar and activist Anna Julia Cooper saw in the work of the Hampton folklorists a framework for aggressively challenging evolutionary models altogether. Like the *Kalevala* for the people of Finland, the Hampton folklorists’ collection was not evidence for the *potential* to create literature but evidence of an existing, vibrant African American literary tradition. Moody-Turner

outlines Cooper's contributions to the study of Black folklore as follows:

First, she argues that concepts such as “civilization” and “folklore” must be understood as value-laden discourses that have everything to do with the creation and perpetuation of racialized, gendered, and classed hierarchies. Second, she critiques the biases often underlying the methods employed in scientific observations and analyses of “the folk.” Third, she offers an alternative approach to accessing and representing group customs, traditions, beliefs, and practices, an approach that is self-conscious about the politics of representation and attentive to the social location and particularities of individuals. And finally, she validates folk and vernacular traditions as a site for the creation of a distinctive African American literary tradition and as a means of expanding the range of voices able to participate in the wider public discourse. (2013, 95)

Cooper challenged the precarity of Black existence by demonstrating the ways in which cultural representations, both as contained in folklore and as embodied through the study of it, reinforce matrices of oppression and dehumanization when they exclude contextual interpretation. She validated the experiential and memory-based frameworks for analysis applied by the Hampton folklorists for their inherent effectiveness. Black folklore and Black folklore studies, she argued, illustrated the extent to which Black precarity was attributable not to a lack of opportunity for evolution but rather to the impropriety of the measuring stick being used to evaluate cultural complexity and artistry.

## Conclusion

In 2018, Bill Ivey published *Rebuilding an Enlightened World*, in which he argues that the world stands on the cusp of cataclysmic transformation: the end of the mainstream acceptance of Enlightenment principles. “Great uncertainty chills the air, around the world and in America,” he writes. “Worldwide disarray has been explained as a response to globalization, instability in a post-Cold War era, the fecklessness of modern governments, the rise of ancient societies, and the collapse of the hegemony of liberal democracy” (Ivey 2018, 11).

Great uncertainty chills the air as the world stares down a future it struggles to imagine. That phrase could be a refrain throughout this article. “No society is forever, no movement is permanent,” Ivey goes on to say, and then concedes that “this truth offers no comfort, for the end of the Enlightenment portends the painful loss of aspirational values in place for centuries” (2018, 11). Indeed, there is nothing comfortable about the impermanent. People learn to survive in the world through experience. When we are threatened with change of such a magnitude that it renders our experience irrelevant, the potential arises for the vast redistribution of precariousness: the wealthy and powerful consolidate their wealth and power, creating, as we have now, a global inequitable distribution of wealth unparalleled in history. The most vulnerable, sensing this moment of tension and potential, seek to secure a little more safety for themselves: as I write this, Black Lives Matter protests continue to take place throughout the US, protesting the systemic racism that renders Black bodies ungrievable. Precarity is up for redistribution, and everyone—including the least vulnerable among us—is looking to reduce their share.

Ivey proposes that, in this moment of crisis, “Folklore scholarship can help” (2018, 146). Folklore and folklore scholarship—Ivey acknowledges the slippage between these categories—bridges the gap between “civilization,” the “elite segment of society that manipulates wealth and power” (2018, 16), and everyone else. “Civilization” created the Enlightenment, but fouled up the delivery, imposing it through suppression rather than introducing it through discourse. Folklore, born of the romantic nationalist resistance to Enlightenment ideals, offers a framework for a more just and humane exchange of ideas.

I think Ivey is right about the decline of the Enlightenment. I also agree that folklore, as both creation of and rebuttal against the Enlightenment, can help, though the transition from theory to practice remains murky. But the rhetoric retains an “us” and “them” dynamic that reminds me of the tension between the American Folklore Society and the Hampton Folklore Society. The former was willing to entertain the views of the latter but not to the extent that they would allow their own intellectual premises to be challenged by people whom they perceived to be less enlightened. Also in 2018, Solimar Otero published “In the Water with Inle: Santería’s Siren Songs in the CircumCaribbean,” which describes circumCaribbean epistemologies that are fluid, shaped in narrative, and actively rejecting Enlightenment binaries including gender, the material and the

spiritual, the institutional and the vernacular, the water and the land, the sacred and profane. I wonder: how would a *transformista*<sup>5</sup> conceive of their own precarity, or of the demise of the Enlightenment? When the AFS members were confronted with new ideas put forward by the Hampton folklorists, they confronted their own precarity and doubled down on the ideals that justified their own greater security. And indeed, when Ivey closes the book by referencing Dell Hymes's 1974 call to elevate folklore to become a primary academic field, it draws attention to the fact that his thesis seeks to mitigate the precarity of folklore as a discipline.

Folklorists are in constant engagement with precarity; once we identify its traits, we can recognize it in the theses and missions of many of our field's widely read and widely taught works and our most influential public organizations. When Henry Glassie describes tradition as "the creation of the future out of the past," he clarifies his argument using language that recalls Herder's justification for Enlightenment-era German nationalism:

[Tradition's] character is not stasis but continuity; its opposite is not change but oppression, the intrusion of a power that thwarts the course of development. Oppressed people are made to do what others will them to do. They become slaves in the ceramic factories of their masters. Acting traditionally, by contrast, they use their own resources—their own tradition, one might say—to create their own future, to do what they will themselves to do. They make their own pots. (Glassie 2003, 177)

When Ray Cashman (2006) talks about critical nostalgia in Northern Ireland, he describes how elders in the Derg Valley fall back on a variety of old traditional practices to contextualize the impacts of modernity which have improved financial security but also reduced their sense of their own grievability. "The individual nostalgic . . . gains purchase on the nature of time . . . and exercises individual agency by implicitly questioning the notion of progress and deciding for him or herself which aspects of change to embrace," Cashman argues (154); we see here the language of assertion of control in the face of change that supports the argument that "Nostalgia can . . . be critical . . . for inspiring action of great moral weight, action that may effect a better future" (138). Both Regina Bendix (1997) and Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs (2003), in their respective tracings of the history of

folklore studies, address how the study of folklore has evolved over time to mitigate the vulnerabilities of the field itself. Bendix describes how the application of the authority associated with the concept of “authenticity” has justified folklore studies since its inception, arguing that “the linkages between authenticity and folklore are many, covering the yearning for autonomy in the discipline, in politics, and in individual selfhood” (1997, 11); “autonomy” implies control and self-direction in the face of vulnerability. Indeed, Bendix asserts that “invocations of authenticity are admissions of vulnerability, filtering the self’s longings into the shaping of the subject” (1997, 17); these longings are for transcendence, for continuity that surpasses the immediate. Bauman and Briggs reflect on how the growth of Western modernity justified its own expansion by shifting the targets of what constituted a provincialized “Other,” regulating inequality for the purpose of perpetuating it and insulating those who benefit from it. They frame their argument by asserting that “Ways of speaking and writing make social classes, genders, races, and nations seem real and enable them to elicit feelings and justify relations of power, making subalterns seem to speak in ways that necessitate their subordination” (Bauman and Briggs 2003, 17). Gary Alan Fine has argued that the spread of folklore, and urban legends in particular, “are the attempts of people to negotiate their current reality, and to deal with changes in their personal environment” (1980, 222); the legend of the Kentucky Fried Rat, in particular, addresses fears surrounding corporatization, changing values, and shifting social roles of women (1980).

The world of public folklore also frames its motives with reference to the mitigation of precarity, even if the word “precarity” does not appear. The Philadelphia Folklore Project’s website advocates for folklore—both the stuff itself and the programming that promotes it—as vital to the persistence of communities through change and challenges. Specifically, PFP’s website says that “We work to preserve and strengthen the folk cultural life of our communities because we believe that the quality of urban life is directly related to the persistence, diversity and vitality of our vernacular folk cultures” (Philadelphia Folklore Project n.d.). New York City’s City Lore includes in its mission “furthering cultural equity and modeling a better world” (City Lore 2015), suggesting that the promotion and practice of folk culture works in opposition to systemic inequity, pushing back against Butler’s unequal distribution of precariousness that shoulders oppressed communities with a disproportionate share of bodily vulnerability. Folklore is inseparable

from the business of managing vulnerability because folklore is inseparable from the business of managing change. Change and vulnerability are part of the same process. As Momaday said: we are all but one generation removed from extinction.

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## Notes

1. "Flexibility" refers to the ability of employers to respond quickly to market changes by increasing or decreasing their workforce, which leads to decreased employment stability for workers; it can also refer to the ability of employers to pay their employees differently for doing the same work when wage levels are not determined collectively, as through a union.

2. Ironically, of course, many of the same stories that appeared in *Kinder und Häßmarchen* also appeared in Charles Perrault's *Contes de Ma Mère L'Oye* a century earlier, in France. The tales themselves were transnational, but the romantic nationalist philosophy recontextualized local variants as representatives of unique national character.

3. Twentieth century scholars have pointed out that as much as 14% of the *Kalevala* may have been written by Lönnrot rather than documented from oral tradition; early celebrations of the text as a triumph of Finnish nationalism have

given way to interpretations that position Lönnrot as an author, as much as a collector, of the fragments that made up the final text that he published (Wilson 2006b, Somner 2016). But similarly to how Perrault's earlier publication of many of the Grimms' tales did not hamper the nationalist agenda of the early publication of the *Kinder und Haüsmarchen*, Lönnrot's creative liberties with the *Kalevala* did not impact its contributions to the Finnish nationalist movement.

4. *Plessy v. Ferguson* was the Supreme Court case wherein the constitutionality of the “separate but equal” doctrine was confirmed, affirming the legality of Jim Crow laws throughout the American South.

5. *Transformistas* are Afro-Caribbean drag queens. Otero uses the term “transformista” rather than drag queen “to retain the word’s association with illusion, transformation, and magic” (2018, 158n28). Otero invites consideration of the transformista practices of lip-sync and “reading” as theoretical lenses through which to interpret the narrative, political, and sexual bodies of orichas—especially Yemayá, Ochun, and Inlé—in Santería. Otero explains: “Transformistas take these skills of orchestration [verbal agility, lip-sync, inhabitation of divas, cohesion of spiritually- and sensually-infused movements] into their everyday lives where they have to negotiate precarious social contexts” (2018, 154).

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