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Worlding Dance

Edited by Susan Leigh Foster

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Edited by

Susan Leigh Foster





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Worlding Dance – An Introduction

Susan Leigh Foster

We convened in Los Angeles, what Saskia Sassen and others have identified as a 'global' city - home to massive numbers of diverse immigrants from across the globe, who, pressured by the uneven flows of capital and ideas, are working to get ahead and co-exist within a myriad of distinctive values, ethics, and practices (Sassen, 1994).¹ In this moment of global awareness, and at a time when even our small field of dance studies has grown to connect scholars from every continent and many countries, we met in Los Angeles to think collectively and with global perspective about something called 'world' dance.² Our meeting was inspired by conversations over the past ten years in the Working Group in Choreography and Corporeality sponsored by the International Federation for Theater Research that brought together an international group of scholars to consider how dance studies is expanding and diversifying throughout the world.³ The department at UCLA that sponsored our meeting is called 'World Arts and Cultures,' and it has offered courses called 'world dance' practices. Many of us teach in programs where courses in various dance traditions are offered under the rubric 'world dance.' To what does this term refer? How and when was it implemented? How might contemporary theories of colonization, nation formation, diaspora, and globalization help us to conduct an inquiry into the term and its effects?

At UCLA the title World Arts evolved out of an earlier nomenclature 'Ethnic Arts,' which in turn grew out of, and was allied with, curricular interests in 'Folk Arts.' Whereas departments of Music, Art, and, eventually, Dance established classically oriented canons of study, faculty felt the need also to recognize the populist and quotidian practices of the folk that were otherwise excluded from these arts curricula. Thus, as early as the 1930s the Women's Physical Education program at UCLA offered 'Folk Dancing' courses along with 'Dancing' courses. And with the establishment of the Department of Dance in the 1960s various nomenclatures were introduced, including 'Creative Dance,' 'Ethnic Dance,' and 'Dances of Specific Cultures.' Partially in response to its Los Angeles location, UCLA's Department of Dance promoted more intensively than many other US programs the study of a variety of dance forms from around the world. The course entitled 'History of Dance,' however, reflected the orientation more typical of US curricula by focusing on the Western tradition from 'Primitive to Renaissance' and 'Baroque to 20th Century.' 'Ethnic Arts,' an interdisciplinary program that attracted faculty from all of the arts departments plus folklore and anthropology came into existence in 1972. In the early 1990s it fused with the Dance Department to become the Department of World Arts and Cultures.

The substitution of 'world' for 'ethnic' at UCLA and in various labeling practices, such as the music industry and arts programming, has worked euphemistically to gloss over the colonial legacy of racialized and class-based hierarchizations of the arts.⁴ Ethnic dances – envisioned as local rather than transcendent, traditional rather than innovative, simple rather than sophisticated, a product of the people rather than a genius – are resuscitated and transformed into products of various cultures from all around the world. The term 'world dance' intimates a neutral comparative field wherein all dances are products of equally important, wonderfully diverse, equivalently powerful cultures. The titling of art as 'world' also promises maximum exposure to a cornucopia of the new and exotic.⁵ Yet through this relabeling, the colonial history that produced the ethnic continues to operate. For example, the brochure for the 2007-08 season of Cal Performances, the annual series of performances sponsored by UC/Berkeley, lists in the category 'Dance' six ballet companies and three modern companies.⁶ Of the 12 press photographs included in the brochure, Alvin Ailey's American Dance Theater and the Guangshou Ballet offer the only photos with non-white dancers. Another category, entitled 'World Stage,' offers concerts by two Latina singers and four African music ensembles, Arlo Guthrie, the Moiseyev Dance Company, and Perú Negro (Cal Performances, 2007-08). On what basis is 'Dance' constituted as exclusively ballet and modern? Why does the 'Dance' category consist overwhelmingly of white artists, whereas artists of color dominate the 'World Stage'? How is it that the Moiseyev Dance Company, described as 'the greatest of all folk dance groups, and Perú Negro, 'offering an intoxicating mix of traditional and new [...],' dance their way onto the 'World Stage' but are not 'Dance'?

In our first discussions about 'world dance,' we focused on the effects of these kinds of categorizations. We examined the legacy of Western dance history – and the violence against dancing wrought by various rubrics of categorization, such as the 'primitive,' that have created complex hierarchies of value and worth. We likewise examined the contemporary status of the world's dances as they have become uprooted from their various locales and commodified and spectacularized for the global stage. We contemplated our own pedagogical investments and predicaments teaching courses that help to perpetuate ethnocentric classificatory systems even as we work to envision new frameworks for comparing and analyzing dances. Over a three-year period of regular meetings, we came increasingly to address how authors and their subjects are implicated in relations of power that produce both subjection and privilege. We affirmed the need for new models of history writing that could provide alternative narrative structures. And we realized the need to recognize our own complicity in the project of 'worlding' dance.

As Edward Said (1983) has argued, any text lives within and partakes of a world. In order to interpret that text, the critic must consider the text's 'historical contingency' and 'sensuous particularity,' determining how to engage with that world as part of the text.⁷ What world has been constructed for dancing through the use of the term 'world dance'? What kinds of worlds do we as scholars create for a given dance when we undertake to describe and analyze it? What effects do our analytic frameworks have upon dance as the object of our study?

This volume, the product of our collective reckoning with these questions, endeavors to make new epistemological space for the analysis of the world's dances. The chapters challenge the very foundations upon which the terms 'ethnic' or 'world' dance were created. They examine the exclusionary processes of collection and classification through which the world-building of various dance practices takes place, and as a result, how they acquire relative value and meaning. The chapters implement a global perspective in order to examine the local – tracing how dances have developed in specific localities, migrated, and transformed alongside and in response to political and cultural pressures. They work to reflexively interrogate the embodied status of the researcher. And they 'choreograph' new approaches to the writing of history that respond to the exigencies of our global political moment.

Sachs's legacy

This volume is certainly not the first or only effort to think about dance in global perspective. In 1937 German musicologist Curt Sachs wrote

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A World History of The Dance, a radical attempt to collate and compare dances from around the world and through time. For Sachs dance is a pan-human phenomenon that originates in the experience of the 'effervescent zest for life' that animates the body, and reaffirms its spiritual as well as social vitality. Regardless of the form the dance takes, its power resides in this primal urge to connect with the divine rhythms of the universe. In conformance with cultural histories of that period, Sachs organized his history to reflect the various developments and refinements of that primal motivation.⁸ He examined, first, evidence of Stone Age dances, then summarized the evolution of dance as spectacle in the 'Oriental Civilizations,' and finally, regressing back in time to the Greek and Roman Classical period, he traced dance's evolution through the Renaissance, the eighteenth century, the age of the waltz (nineteenth century) and that of the tango (twentieth century). In this approach Sachs presumes that contemporary exemplars of Stone Age dances endure in the 'tribal' rituals of communities such as the pygmies. He likewise assumes that dances of Asia have remained unchanging for thousands of years. Thus, for Sachs, the only dance forms to have evolved through time are those practiced in Western Europe.

Sachs's narrative depends upon several assumptions that continue to haunt the practice of dancing and the study of dance. Foremost among these is Sachs's assertion that dance in its most original and ontological form is the product of an ecstatic subjectivity. As Sachs describes the process, the dancer is possessed by the dance: 'Delivered then from his will, the dancer gives himself over to the supreme delight of play prescribed by custom [...].' In this conceptualization of dance, the autonomous individual is guided by culturally specific customs to produce a distinctive expression of a universal experience of transcendence. Cultures look different on the surface, but their underlying structures reflect the contours of the human predicament. Similarly, dances manifest in a vast diversity of forms, yet they are unified by their common function of providing an ecstatic alternative to quotidian life.

While much dance scholarship over the past 20 years has contested this assumption, as well as the allied notions of authenticity, spontaneity, and the general trope of the natural, dances categorized as 'ethnic' or 'world' forms continually fall under its influence. In the classroom and on the global stage, dances from Europe and the US are received as choreographed, contrived or arranged as representation, and those from other parts of the world are treated as more fervent and immediate, and therefore capable of offering an unmediated glimpse into the cultural distinctiveness of their respective communities. Thus, according to the Cal Performances brochure, the Moiseyev Dance company offers 'exuberant evocations of traditional dances,' whereas Mark Morris's 'combination of lyricism and astounding precision [...] marks the emergence of an instant classic' (Cal Performances, 2007–08: 5, 3). The Moiseyev evokes a way of life, whereas Morris's choreography achieves the standards of excellence necessary to become a classic. Similarly, the highly popular culture clubs at US universities that deploy dance as the principle expressive medium within which to assert diasporic identity are typically removed from, and non-aligned with, departments of dance. 'Art' dance or 'concert' dance dwells in the unmarked realm of aesthetics, removed from both the social and the political, whereas 'culture' nights use dance as marker of, and integral to, a way of life.

Whether spontaneous or contrived, the assumption that dances share a common universal origin enables them to be compared, one with another, using standard categories of analysis. For Sachs, these standardized systems of measurement included simple positions of the body, such as bent or straight knees; actions, such as stamping or turning; motions, such as expansion or convulsion; and configurations of dancers, such as serpentines, rounds or choral dances. In these comparisons, Sachs privileged the shape of the body, conceptualized as a geometry with angles, straight lines, a center and a periphery, and whose direction of motion likewise leaves a trace with geometric attributes – curved or straight. The seemingly neutral implementation of geometry obliterates indigenous senses of value and meaning in the dancing, uprooting the dancing from its local habitat and relocating it to an unmarked space where it can be evaluated and compared with other forms.

Beginning in the 1960s, a team of researchers led by anthropologist Alan Lomax resuscitated Sachs's approach in their development of the 'choreometrics' project, a rating system for the comparative study of dances using analytic frameworks corollary to Rudolf Laban's systems of movement analysis. Envisioning dance as 'a representation and reinforcement of cultural pattern,' they observed postural and movement flow patterns in films of dances from around the world, determining a strong correspondence between features of the movement repertoire utilized for purposes of subsistence and those invoked in dancing. These researchers found that the bodily stance and style of transition, whether 'cyclic, angular, rotated, or looped,' among others, assumed while dancing correlated strongly with the 'rubbing, digging, or chopping,' and the like entailed in food production (Lomax, Bartinieff and Paulay, 1968: 240–1). Not only does Lomax's approach implement universal categories that provide standards of measurement against which all dances can be analyzed and then compared, but it also implies a hierarchy of cultures, similar to Sachs's, that moves from more 'primitive' to 'complex' social organizations.

Both Sachs's and Lomax's projects are undergirded by a classical and linear narrative of continual progress and the invention of new forms. 'Proper' histories, in Hayden White's nomenclature, they are founded in the moralizing impulse to embrace all human activity as unfolding with greater and greater complexity in a single plan that the studies themselves help to reveal (White, 1980). Dance's history, they suggest, can be understood through the chronological study of its development over time, using classificatory rubrics that prove one dance's influence upon another.

More recently, Pegge Vissicaro and a team of computer scientists have developed an ethnochoreological comparison that, although it refrains from any implicit or explicit ranking of cultural systems, subjects the dancing body to a similar set of universal criteria for movement analysis. Their study focuses on the changing distances between parts of the body and the concomitant alteration in their silhouettes as well as the distance among dancers and their paths through space (Golshani, Vissicaro and Park, 2004: 90). Using technologies at the Multimedia Information Systems Laboratory at Arizona State, they have 'extracted' these measurements from films of dances by dividing the image into segments and detecting edges of shapes so as to track their changes over time (2004: 92). They envision the new information processing potential of computer systems as more adequate to the task of parsing dance's complexity. However, the process of extracting that information from the dancing body through the construction of abstract, geometric principles remains the same as in Sachs's and Lomax's approaches.

Sachs's assertion that dance originates in the ecstatic psyche, and his use of seemingly neutral frames of analysis, constituted dance as an object separate from the operations of power. Although it might reflect a political hierarchy, a competition, or a division of labor, dance stands apart from the 'real' workings of society. Lomax's theory integrated dance into social organization as a styling of the body and movement that resonated with other physical practices. Calling dance an 'information system,' Vissicaro and colleagues likewise conceptualize dance as a complex event affecting both practitioners and viewers through multiple sensory channels. Whether as a representation of individual or cultural states of being, however, dance, as a fundamentally ephemeral and transitory event, can only reflect cultural value and meaning. In all three research projects, it does not actively participate in the construction of such meaning.

In contrast to this legacy, the chapters in this volume examine dance, not as a reflection of individual or cultural values, but *as* culture. As culture, dance is in(sinew)ated with power relations. Built bone-deep into the dancing body and permeating its practice and performance, these structurings of power both discipline and pleasure the body. And this cultivation of the corporeal takes place within and as a part of the power relations that operate throughout the body politic.

Body memories/bodyscapes

Contemporaneous with Lomax, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu began conducting his fieldwork among the Kabyle of Algeria in the 1960s. Not unlike Lomax, he envisions bodily attitudes and ways of moving as a pervasive repertoire of patterns that circulates throughout the social (Bourdieu, 1980). Unlike Lomax, Bourdieu endows this 'habitus' with the capacity actively to participate in the construction of cultural meaning. He posits the body as a repository of forms of cultural memory that have never been documented in history. For Bourdieu, however, this form of memorizing and commemorating is fundamentally conservative: the body's movement repertoire retains and holds on to the past. Even when improvising, its actions are limited to a rule-governed range of responses that serve only to rediscover and renew traditions of thought and action. Bourdieu thereby casts the body in the role of a vehicle for tradition. In so doing, he, like Lomax, identifies the body as a vehicle for channeling culture rather than creating culture, as expressing culture rather than as expressive in and of itself.

Bourdieu's theory of the habitus also presumes that culture is relatively stable, cohesive, and distinct. Subsequent studies in ethnography, such as those by James Clifford and George Marcus, have argued that boundaries defining cultural difference are inherently porous and unstable (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). They constantly reconstruct themselves, produced partially by the physical responsiveness of the ethnographic encounter and the equally physical act of writing an ethnography. More recently, Homi Bhabha has argued for the in-between status of culture, and Arjun Appadurai has suggested that not only is culture a messy and unstable aggregate of practices, but also that these practices are themselves in motion (Appadurai, 1996, 2001; Bhabha, 2004). Culture thus configures as the synergistic encounter between 'process geographies' and 'scapes,' such as those contoured by media, technology, or economic practices.

For her chapter in this volume, Lena Hammergren adapts these concepts, following sociologist Paula Saukko's expansion of Appadurai's 'scape' to include the bodyscape (Saukko, 2003). For Hammergren, the bodyscape functions as a set of corporeal vectors that intersect with other systems of values, likewise in motion, to construct meaning. She accounts for the complex reception of Ram Gopal's performances of Indian dance in Sweden by examining it as the frictive encounter between the ever-changing conglomerates known as India and Sweden, but also the evolving Swedish notions of classicism and modernism and the nation's relationship to the emerging formation known as the United Nations.

The notion of bodyscape could also be useful in examining how certain social pressures, such as those embedded within the Euro-American museum, work to exclude physical forms of signification. In her analysis of the new Native American Museum in Washington, DC, Jacqueline Shea Murphy elucidates traditional assumptions about a museum's function and contents through comparison with a Native perspective on corporeal forms of knowledge. As Shea Murphy argues, Native dance and ceremonial practices form a central means of knowledge production and transmission that refuses categorization within the typical boundaries of the museum. Such practices are not stored in some kind of container called the body as a form of memory. Rather, they re-member knowledge through their movements as the body acts.

Diana Taylor has identified this capacity of physicality to re-create and reinvigorate memory as the repertoire, placing it in dialectical tension with the archive – systems of documentation that, although still ephemeral, endure with greater permanence (Taylor, 2003). For Taylor this repertoire of movements, through which history is summoned up and reinvoked, does not necessarily perform the conservative, retentive function that Bourdieu envisions for the habitus. The repertoire can also salvage histories repressed by colonial or dictatorial domination, and it can network with other repertoires to construct new alliances or affiliations across cultural differences. As Cynthia Novack has persuasively demonstrated in her ethnographic study of contact improvisation, the repertoire can serve to invent and/or subvert cultural values (Novack, 1990). Furthermore, the same actions can embody multiple, and even contradictory, values.

Decolonizing dancing

As we convened in Los Angeles, we aspired to construct inquiries into dancing that would acknowledge and celebrate the complexity of any given dance's significance while simultaneously locating it within a global perspective on dance. Specifically, we worked to imagine new rubrics of analysis that do not depend upon the kinds of universal categories invoked by Sachs, Lomax, and Vissicaro as a means to convoke relatedness. And we hoped to complicate the procedures through which dance is written into history, similar to the way that Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies options for post-colonial historians to rewrite their colonial pasts (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Examining the legacy of Western history and its use of universal terms, Chakrabarty characterizes Western historical time as 'godless, continuous, and homogeneous,' a construct exempt from supernatural forces, Gods, and spirits that creates a bottomless sack into which any number of events can be stuffed (2000: 73). He argues that time, as a natural category against which all experience is to be measured, must be contested. Concomitant with this use of time, Western history depends upon the split between public and private selves and upon the assertion of a secular worldview. As a result, post-colonial historians struggle with the dual mandate to implement a public and secular perspective while at the same time interrogating that framework as part of the colonizing and civilizing process to which their ancestors were subjected (2000: 93).

Thus, rather than merely succumb to Western conventions for history writing by using its conventions to tell the stories of previously unrepresented peoples, Chakrabarty advocates a form of history that documents the contradictions inherent in the confrontations between distinctive worldviews. This is not to say that all cultures can tidily be separated into cohesive units and their contacts with one another carefully recorded. Nor is it justification for the distinction between 'emic' and 'etic' points of view, a framework that perpetuates the possibility of cross-cultural comparison using standardized categories of analysis. Instead, Chakrabarty argues for the need for new models of translating experience that do not depend upon a middle term that functions as a universal. As example, he cites the way that the symbol denoting the chemical constitution of water, H_2O , stands as the universal for water, even though its name is water in English and 'pani' in Hindi (2000: 75).

Chakrabarty proposes that historians search out these new forms of translation by writing the confrontation between one model of history and another occur, and he urges us to conceptualize these confrontations as knots in time, or in Hindu 'granthi,' a term that references all manner of jointed articulations such as those that compose the skeleton. 'Granthi' are dense with potentials to move in multiple directions. They both register the influence of forces exercised upon them and actively channel or direct those forces. This approach does not expand traditional modes of history writing to include new subjects, previously ignored or repressed. For Chakrabarty, writing history as knotted, is not a form of cultural relativism, but rather a project of conceptualizing history as contradictory, plural, heterogeneous.

Continuing our discussions of what it might mean to embark on writing about dance with these concerns in mind, we found ourselves embarked on the vertiginous project of calling into question many of the fundamental terms of our discipline. For example, is the notion of 'form' one that already demands of dancing the exhibition of certain aesthetic principles or features that make its structure visible? When we speak of dancing's form, to what features are we referring? Do all dances have a form or formal properties? Does the discussion of a dance's form partition the practice from the practitioners? And what might be the consequences of this separation? When we trace the migration of (a form of) dancing from one location to another, on what basis can we draw comparisons?

A similar set of questions arises around the concept of technique: Is there any generalized conception of 'technique' that dance practices share? Could 'training' the body mean the same thing in different geographies? Dance scholarship has already called into question whether any specific criteria can be used to assess technical competence. But what if implicit in the notion of technique itself are different attitudes toward the body and its relationship to subjectivity? Can technique be separated from spirit? from pleasure? or from moveability?

Can we distinguish between the dance and the space surrounding it? Do dances occur in space? Do they create space? How has space, similar to Chakrabarty's critique of the Western notion of time, come to function as a blank, neutral container for dancing? What effects does such a conception of space have on the teaching of dancing?

And can we separate a dance's choreography from its performance? Three of the chapters in this volume tackle this question by looking at the ways choreography has been conceptualized in different artistic and scholarly practices. Anthea Kraut examines how copyright policies have impinged upon and been influenced by prevailing conceptions of choreography in the early twentieth century. My chapter considers the evolution of choreography from its eighteenth-century meaning to the early twentieth century, noting how the term has functioned to categorize traditions of dancing. And Marta Savigliano looks at how the term has been used to suture together distinctive epistemological inquiries into the value and meaning of dancing.

Writing about a subject in motion while in motion

Each of the chapters in this volume wrestles with the knotted quality of history writing. They resist efforts at comparison based on universal categories, and instead envision the project of translating dance to the written page as a labor of identifying and examining the complexities of the project. They work to excavate subjugated knowledges and also to construct new forms of narration.

Many of the chapters examine the mobility of dancing bodies and practices across national boundaries. Yutian Wong tackles the identity of Michio Ito as an 'international artist' whose fame was based, in part, on his status as an exceptional person who transcended national boundaries. She further exposes the kinds of racial bias that enables a category such as that of international artist in the first place. Similarly, Hammergren examines Ram Gopal as a kind of international artist whose reception so clearly altered from one country to the next. Priya Srinivasan looks at the disparate functions enacted by the Bharata Natyam concert as it is performed by the professional artist in Chennai and by the adolescent NRI (Non-Resident Indian) in southern California. And Savigliano traces the migration of the very term 'world dance' across multiple archives and knowledge bases.

Several of the essays make use of the writer's own physical experiences and situatedness to inform their analysis. Srinivasan places her own body as a central node through which multiple discourses from both past and present, Chennai and southern California pass. Her essay weaves back and forth between the object of history and the historian's own life, so that each illuminates the other. Hammergren constructs a genealogy that works backwards from her own study of Indian dance, showing how alternative frameworks of classification can be constructed. Shea Murphy observes her own physical responses to the museum alongside those of other visitors and the staff. And Ananya Chatterjea stitches a quilt-like narrative that includes patches from her own history of dancing 'folk' dance and 'expressive' dance in Kolkata.

And each of the chapters crafts a distinctive narrative style, one that foregrounds the kinds of documentation with which they are working.

Kraut, for example, extrapolates from copyright law as well as rumor in order to forge an argument about racialized power relations underwriting the transformation of dance into a form of intellectual property. Wong and Chatterjea emphasize the absences in documentation that have been produced through operations of the nation-state. And Srinivasan performs as an unruly spectator whose inability to keep focused on the dancing body yields important insights concerning the labor that produced it. Taken together, the chapters offer a toolbox of tactics that, far from constituting a revisionist world history of the dance, will hopefully promote ongoing debate over the worlds that dances create and the worlds that we create for them.

Notes

- 1. For additional perspective on Los Angeles history and culture, and the diversity of dance practices it supports, see Hamera.
- 2. For example, the joint conference of the Society of Dance History Scholars and the Congress on Research in Dance held in June 2007 at the Centre National de la Danse, Paris, brought together 500 scholars from 30 different countries on five continents.
- 3. Lena Hammergren and I co-founded this Working Group in 1998, and it continues to meet at all FIRT conferences.
- 4. As Tim Taylor has shown, the phrase 'world music' came into widespread use in the late 1980s in response to the overwhelming popularity of musical genres from West Africa and South Asia. Realizing that these musics could not be sold as 'ethnic,' producers devised a new category to compete with 'classical,' 'pop,' 'jazz,' and so on (Taylor, 1997: 1–3).
- 5. For example, consider this enthusiastic description of courses offered through UCLA's student center under the headline 'Grades/Groove: Students can release stress, get moving and get units in a variety of classes from hiphop to salsa': 'Forget the days of forced country line-dancing lessons in the elementary school gymnasium with partners plagued by two left feet and country music crackling through an outdated stereo system. The John Wooden Center and the world arts and cultures department offer cultural dance classes that provide students with an alternative way to work out and learn about world cultures through movement and music' (Cohn, 2008: 1).
- 6. My selection of this brochure is purely arbitrary and intended only to point towards the generalized use of the category 'world.' I want also to clarify that the programming by Cal Performances is unrelated to the activities of the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies at UC/Berkeley. As at UCLA, the season of performances presented by the campus received little or no input from the faculty and is entirely separate from departmentally sponsored events.
- 7. Said writes that the text's 'worldliness, circumstantiality, the text's status as an event having sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency, are considered as being incorporated in the text, an infrangible part of its

capacity for conveying and producing meaning. This means that a text has a specific situation, placing restraints upon the interpreter and his interpretation not because the situation is hidden within the text as a mystery, but rather because the situation exists at the same level of surface particularity as the textual object itself' (1983: 39).

8. See Youngerman (1974) for a robust critique of Sachs' approach, one that locates his efforts within the historical context of scholarly inquiry into folk materials.