

Figure Skating and the Anthropology of Dance: The Case of Oksana Domnina and Maxim Shabalin

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Abstract

In this paper, I address a number of topics relevant to anthropology generally and to the anthropology of dance specifically. I consider issues of classification and taxonomies; of interculturalism and transnationalism; of representation, exoticisation and internalised racism. I examine dance, hierarchies and discrimination, and discuss boundaries between dance and non-dance. For example, dance scholars, with a few exceptions, rarely write about figure skating, although it is cognate to Western theatre dance genres, especially ballet. Figure skating is *sport*, even in its *ice dancing* incarnation, whilst dance is *art* even in its ballet competition incarnations. I use as a case study the Russian skaters Oksana Domnina and Maxim Shabalin, who choreographed an ‘Australian Aboriginal Dance’ for their original routine for the 2010 European skating championships and Olympics. This offended Aboriginal elders who made a complaint to the Russian ambassador. I examine the controversy around the routine, how it was reported in the press and how the audience responded in Internet forums, focusing especially on the way Australian Aborigines continue to be portrayed as *stone age* in popular media.

KEY WORDS: aesthetics, Australian Aborigines, ballet, Internet forums, dance, ice skating, taxonomies

Introduction

One of the premises of the anthropology of dance, is that the term ‘dance’ is problematic as it carries preconceptions of what this activity engages with, which is rooted into a Western way of understanding the body in space and time, situating it in a particular relationship to a soundscape. Anthropologists Adrienne Kaeppler (1978; 1989) and Drid Williams (1976/1977; 1996; 2004), two of the key founders of the (sub)-discipline, preferred to use terms such as *structured movement system* and *human action signs* to avoid unnecessary connotations and start with as open a mind as possible. Similarly, the term *aesthetics* and *art* have been used with caution to deal with genres that are not rooted in European traditions (Kealiinohomoku 1976; 1980). Since those early days, a great deal has been published

focusing on specific cultural systems, emphasising heterogeneity and differences, as well as fluid boundaries between genres. One finds texts on cross-cultural aesthetics (see for example Giurchescu, Grau, Kaeppler, Mohd, and Sparti in the 2003 issue of the *Yearbook for Traditional Music*), soma-aesthetics and racism (Granger 2010), gynecentric aesthetics (Cox 1990), as well as examinations of the overlap between music and dance (Grau 1983; Kaeppler 1996), or between cognate movement genres (see for example Zarrili's studies (1998; 2000) on the dance/theatre genre of Kathakali and the cognate martial art form of Kalaripayatu).

Taxonomies and classification systems may not be as fashionable as in the heydays of Structural and Cognitive Anthropology, yet the categories human beings use say a great deal about how they engage with the world. There is no doubt, for example, that the separation between dance and sport, or the classification of dance into art, social, popular, folk, primitive and so on says more about the views some members of Western society hold about class and race than about human movement.

In this essay, I will discuss issues of dance, hierarchies, and discrimination, first examining some of the values underpinning Western theatre dance, both in its ballet and *modern dance* incarnations. I will then examine the boundaries between art and sport, focusing on the arbitrary distinction between two movement systems: *dance* and *figure skating*. Finally, I will investigate figure skating as a cognate genre of dance and examine in some details the case of the Russian skaters Oksana Domnina and Maxim Shabalin to examine how most of the clichés about gender and race were upheld in their original routine created for the 2010 Russian Nationals, European and Olympics Ice Dancing championships. The dance offended Aboriginal elders who made a complaint to the Russian ambassador. I will investigate the controversy around the routine, how it was reported in the press and how the audience responded in Internet forums, focusing especially on the way Australian Aborigines continue to be portrayed as 'Stone Age people' in popular media.

Dance's hierarchies: the hegemony of ballet

The hierarchy of dance genres has largely been established through the discourses and practices surrounding Western theatre dance, whether ballet or modern dance. I argue that one can talk about the hegemony of Western theatre dance generally, and ballet specifically, in the sense that the latter is the lens through which all other genres of dance have been, and still are, given value today. The hegemony of ballet may seem surprising to some, but it is undeniable that most, if not all, dance genres from around the world have been/are influenced by the ballet aesthetic when transformed from social/ritual settings into theatrical performances. Think, for example, of the proscenium arch presentation and the use of symmetry and mirror images in staging, when movements are performed on both the left and right even when in their original setting they are only performed on one side, often because of cosmological associations between left and right, between clockwise and anticlockwise. Furthermore the use of ballet terminology is commonly used to discuss non-ballet movement material. Dance scholar Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, for example, discussing the south Indian technique of Mohini Attam, referred to *plié* rather than use an indigenous

term (2006: 34) to refer to a knee bend with both feet on the floor. Undoubtedly more, less obvious, examples could be found but this is not the place to engage in such a debate (see Anthony Shay (2002, 2006) for discussions on borrowing that national folk ensembles made from ballet and on ballet's reinterpretation of the folk heritage). Ballet vocabulary has also found its way into ice dancing terminology with terms such as *coupé*, *passé* and *attitude* being acknowledged leg and foot positions recognised by the International Skating Union (ISU 2008: 138).

Ballet, the oldest European theatre dance genre, is rarely, if ever, perceived as being culturally rooted or having been historically implicated in cross-cultural transactions. This is so despite the fact that Joann Kealiinohomoku's germinal article 'An anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance' (1969/70) was published forty years ago and has been republished a number of times in collected editions since. Because ballet is now performed in many parts of the world, it is seen as somewhat 'neutral' and 'universal'. The reality, however, is rather different. Because the French court of Louis XIV (1638–1715) saw its 'birth', one often forgets ballet's Italian origins. According to dance historian Ivor Guest (Guest 1960: 12–17), the originator of ballet's five canonical positions,¹ Balthasar de Beaujoyeulx² (ca 1535–1587), came to France in the mid-16th century as part of a band of Italian musicians appointed to the court of Catherine de Médicis (1519–1589), well known for her patronage of the arts.³ Steeped in the Milanese tradition of court entertainment, he produced festivities on the Italian scale for the French court. Louise de Lorraine, wife of Henri III, commissioned what was to become his most famous work, the extravagant *Ballet comique de la Royne* (1581), as part of her sister Marguerite de Valdemont's wedding celebrations to the Duc de Joyeuse, as a way of gaining prestige and influence.⁴ The ballet lasted over five hours and brought together Beaujoyeux's Italian performance heritage and his absorptions of the theories of the short-lived *Académie de*

¹ These were later further defined by Pierre Beauchamp (1631–1705).

² He was originally known as Baltarazini di Belgioso.

³ Daughter of the Florentine ruler Lorenzo de Medici, she came to France in 1533 when she married the future King, Henry II. She was queen consort from 1547 to 1559. Three of her sons became kings of France: François II (1544–1560) who reigned 1559–1560 and married Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1558; Charles IX (1550–1574) who reigned 1560–1573 and for which she was regent between 1560–1563, who married Elizabeth of Austria in 1570; and Henri III (1551–1589) who reigned from 1574 to 1589. Considering that among her daughters, Élisabeth (1545–1568) married Philip II King of Spain in 1559 and was queen consort of Spain (1559–1568), and Marguerite (1553–1615), the famous Queen Margot of Dumas' fame, married in 1572 Henri de Bourbon (1553–1610), King of Navarre, the future Henry IV of France (1589–1610) one can see the trans-nationalism of Europe's royal families. This brief overview of 16th century France, gleaned primarily for the French Larousse encyclopaedia, shows in what way dance that was promoted in one royal court quickly become transnational. Dance Historian Marie-Françoise Christout discussed how Louis XIII (1601–1643), the eldest child of Henry IV of France and Marie de Medici (who married him following the annulment of his marriage to Marguerite de Valois) was a keen dancer and that 'his passion was shared by his brother, Gaston d'Orléans; while in London and Turin his sisters Henriette-Marie of France, Queen of England, and Marie Christine, Queen of Savoy, showed an equal interest' (Christout 1964: 7–8)

⁴ Anne d'Arques, Duc de Joyeuse was Henri III's favourite. The king had commissioned spectacular celebrations. Not to be outdone, the queen sponsored the ballet as an evening entertainment that would be part of the extended festivities (Greene 1994).

Musique et de Poésie he had discovered in his adopted country (Greene 1994; McGowan 1982). Similarly, Jean-Baptiste de Lully (Giovanni Battista di Lulli), who was to come to great fame with his collaboration with Molière, also came from Italy in the 17th century to work at the court of Louis XIV (Pastori 1996: 22–23). Dancers and ballet masters moving across borders were common occurrence in ballet's early years and the genre was both transnational and multicultural from its very inception. In the 20th century, however, this transnationalism was somewhat democratised with the less exalted dancers of the *corps de ballet* crossing borders in the quest for work just as often as the *étoiles* did, albeit in different circumstances (see Wulff 1998).

Why is it then that ballet used to be viewed as French? One could argue that it is because of its thorough institutionalisation and 'canonisation' in France between 1661, when Louis XIV founded the *Académie Royale de Danse*⁵ and 1674 when the system developed by Charles-Louis-Pierre de Beauchamps, the academy's first ballet master, was fully codified (Bourcier 1978: 115). Alternatively, 1667, the year Louis XIV signed a royal edict forbidding public representation of folk/regional dances (Adolphe cited in Bruni 1993: 291), could be chosen as this was undoubtedly significant in giving ballet the hegemonic position that it still holds today as a spectacular genre. Training became standardised and a terminology was adopted, which continues to be used to this day around the world in its original language. This commoditisation made the genre easier to package, to export, and to become international in the process. The ascendance of Russian ballet in the 19th century could also be seen as linked to its institutionalisation, with the opening of the Maryinski theatre and its school in 1860, and the development of an exportable training method. This brief overview of ballet has shown in what way the genre is politically and culturally rooted in the history of the Western world. Let us now turn to the history of American modern dance.

American modern dance, racism, and discrimination

Whilst most general dance histories present it as a liberation of the body from the shackling of ballet, I would argue that the development of American modern dance also shows in what way the genre is embedded within the history of the discrimination and racism that was intrinsic to North America in the first half of the 20th century. Isadora Duncan, for example, is generally seen as the pioneer of modern dance and as such a liberator of the body. She fought against the high culture of ballet but as dance scholar Ann Daly commented:

As for ragtime and jazz, whose popularity provided her with fierce competition during her second set of American tours, she scornfully dismissed them on many an occasion as 'this deplorable modern dancing, which has its roots in the ceremonies of African primitives' (1994: 13).

⁵ Once the *École Royale de Danse* was established in 1713 and attached to the thriving Paris Opera, both *Académie* and *École* run concurrently until the demise of the former in 1793 (Needham 1997: 177)

Indeed in her autobiography *My Life*, Duncan argued:

I often wonder where is the American composer [...] who will compose the true music for the American dance which will contain no jazz rhythm – no rhythm from the waist down, but from the solar plexus, the temporal home of the soul, upwards to the Star-Spangled Banner [...]. It seems to me monstrous that any one should believe that the Jazz rhythm expresses America. Jazz rhythm expresses the primitive savage. America's music would be something different. It has yet to be written. No composer has yet caught this rhythm of America – it is too mighty for the ears of most. But some day it will gush forth from the great stretches of Earth, rain down from the vast sky spaces, and America will be expressed in some Titanic music that will shape its chaos to harmony, and long-legged shining boys and girls will dance to this music, not the tottering, ape-like convulsions of the Charleston, but a striking, tremendous upward movement, mounting high above the Pyramids of Egypt, beyond the Parthenon of Greece, an expression of beauty and strength such as no civilization has ever known (1933 [1927]: 358).

As visual culture scholar Melissa Ragona argued:

The 'long-legged shining boys and girls' in this text are presented as radically separate from, and implicitly superior to the 'primitive savage'. The 'unconscious', but 'perfectly natural nakedness' of the 'savage' is no longer the Dionysian 'nakedness' found in the 'mature' man or woman of her earlier work. And Duncan's focus is no longer 'movement' but rather, a valorizing of the static colossal of monuments: the Pyramids of Egypt, the Parthenon of Greece (Ragona 1994: 59).

Dance scholars such as Thomas DeFrantz (2002; 2006), Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996; 2000; 2003), Susan Manning (2004), John Perpener (2001) and Danielle Robinson (2002; 2006; 2009), have written extensively, showing how early African American dancers and choreographers were discriminated even by those who supported them. Many dancers of the Left, for example, encouraged black dancers as 'leftist culture was premised on a cross-class and cross-racial alliance' (Manning 2004: 60). Pearl Primus (1919–1994), for instance, was awarded a dance scholarship to the *New Dance Group*. It was quite clear, however, that for many, African Americans were expected to work within a specific framework, drawing 'from black folk life and from the peasant life of colonized nations around the world' (Manning 2004: 152). As DeFrantz put it 'modern dance was ideologically and physically not only a gendered (female), but a racialized (white) affair' (DeFrantz 2002: 128). For example, the *Dance Observer's* critic Lois Balcolm admired Primus very much. Reviewing her theatre debut in 1944, she wrote:

If newspaper reviewers, publicity writers, and popular audiences force her into the typical, predetermined pattern of the 'negro' dancer instead of letting her work out her salvation as the fine modern dancer, which she potentially is, it will be a pity (in DeFrantz 2002:129).

For Balcolm, a dancer can be saved from 'negro' to a superior 'art' dance and she has a clear agenda on what constitutes modern dance and on who can or cannot belong to

it. Discussing Katherine Dunham's (1909–2006) *Tropical Review* (1943), for example, she located it 'in another category, falling somewhere between concert dance and jive jitters' (cited in Manning 2004: 155). Perperner additionally notes that she also 'assumed a position of cultural *hauteur* when she spoke of the absurdity of even thinking of comparing Primus and Alicia Markova or Martha Graham' (Perperner 2001: 21). In a response to this sort of attitude, the renowned African American dancer Arthur Mitchell argued:

Ballet is the noble way of dancing; is nobility a virtue of the white dancer alone, and not of the black? Ballet is the classical theatre dance, but have you ever seen African dance – what could be more classic than a Watusi dancer? [...] There is no difference, except for the color between a black ballet dancer and a white ballet dancer' (in Emery 1988: 318).

In view of this it is interesting to note that whilst Mitchell joined the prestigious New York City ballet in 1955, therefore entering one of the bastions of American high culture, he remained the only black dancer in the company until 1970 (Emery 1988 [1980]: 280).

It was not just critics who perpetuated primitivist myths about the black dancing body. Gottschild has commented on how Martha Graham contented: 'We have two primitive sources, dangerous and hard to handle in the arts, but of intense psychic significance – the Indian and the Negro' (Gotschild 1996: 47). As DeFrantz puts it:

Black bodies offered a cipher of 'not-ness' that enabled whites to articulate modernity in the first part of the twentieth century. Toni Morrison writes persuasively about blackness in literature, to remind us that the white American modern could not exist without its opposite of the black African primitive. [...] In concert dance, the most celebrated first-generations modern choreographers [...] struggled with the figuration of dancing black bodies in their work. These artists could not – and did not – ignore black bodies altogether, but by and large they imagined blackness as an alternative to monotonous, everyday whiteness, as a site of ecstatic release to be summoned when needed (2006: 20).

Much more could be said about this, but space does not allow it. Suffice to comment that things have not entirely changed and contemporary choreographers who do not fit nicely within the Western canon comment on the situation. British choreographer Shobana Jeyasing, for example, has complained that bharatanatyam practitioners are 'valued as race relation officers, cultural ambassadors, experts in multiculturalism, anthropological exhibits – everything save dance technicians' (in Sporton 2004: 84).

Dance and Sport

Dance and sport have a great deal in common. Indeed, in 1974 Joseph Mazo entitled his study of New York City Ballet, *Dance is a Contact Sport*, and journalists referred to British ice skater John Curry as the 'Nureyev of the ice' in 1976⁶ after he won gold at the European, the World

⁶ Similarly the Norwegian ice skater Sonja Henie was labelled the 'Pavlova of the ice' after winning the Olympics in 1932.

championships, and the Olympics.⁷ Yet dance and sport are generally seen as belonging to different, and some would argue opposed, cultural domains. One belongs to ‘art’, the other to ‘competition’. In this perspective, art is ‘exalted’, sport is not. Philosopher Spencer Wertz has discussed how much of this debate is rooted in 19th-century conception of art (1985a: 9). Many dance genres, however, are or have become competitive. The best known are probably Competitive Ballroom Dancing / Dancesport (see for example Marion 2008; McMains 2006; Penny 1999; Picart 2006) and Irish dancing (see for example Brennan 1994; Foley 2001; Hall 2009). Yet ballet scholar Geraldine Morris (2008) has discussed the proliferation of ballet competitions since the 1960s and *Varna*,⁸ the first and probably still the most prestigious, has been referred to as a ‘Ballet Olympiad’ (Gregory 1983). I cannot go into details here about the argument, but it is worth noting that underpinning all discussion of artistic/non artistic merits, one finds claims over ‘territories’. Morris (2008), for example, noted that at the *Prix de Lausanne*,⁹ where candidates win a scholarship to a prestigious ballet school, some of the judges coming from the *Paris Opera School* or the *Vaganova School* in Russia saw their institutions as receivers of prize winners rather than as senders of their students. Considering that their training was the best in the world, they argued that their students had no interest in going anywhere else. It may well be true too that if some were to do so, they would then be looked down upon as inappropriate company material for their lack of loyalty to the system, therefore effectively prohibiting them from expanding their dance horizons.

In schools and higher education, for a long time dance was considered part of physical education, where it held a marginalised, ‘feminine’ status. As its practitioners fought to gain recognition, much was written on dance as a concept.¹⁰ Whole issues of journals were devoted to the topic, largely in the fields of the Philosophy of Education and of Aesthetics. Philosopher Louis Arnaud Reid (1970), for example, discussed the aesthetic aspects of sports and games on the one hand, and dance on the other. He argued that sport was made up of a whole spectrum of genres and that whilst

[i]n most games, competition against an opponent (an individual or team) is assumed’ at the other end of the spectrum ‘gymnastics, diving, skating [...] the manner in which the activity is carried out, seems to be of central importance (1970: 246).

Another philosopher, David Best, made similar distinctions between what he called the ‘purposive’ sports, which include games and track and field sports, and the ‘aesthetic’ sports, which include gymnastic, diving, and figure skating (Best 1978; 1985).

⁷ His results at the European Championship when all nine judges gave 5.9 for artistic expression, was unprecedented and the excitement it provoked was only surpassed when other British skaters, Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean, won the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics in ice dancing with the highest scoring of all time, receiving twelve perfect 6.0s for artistic expression (see Jordan and Thomas 1995 for an interesting analysis of their work from a dance perspective).

⁸ Named after the Bulgarian sea resort where it is held.

⁹ The competition was created in the Swiss town in 1973 for young dancers between the age of 15 and 18.

¹⁰ In the United Kingdom and the United States, Dance and Physical Education have been separated in higher education for some years, but remain together in many other countries.

The argument here is not that only some sports have aesthetic content, but that in some instances it is largely the aesthetically minded observers who find an aesthetic quality in a beautifully executed move performed by a sportsperson in contrast to those sports where 'style' or 'artistic merit' are assessed under competitive conditions. In the former, the aesthetic qualities are largely by-products. They are not intrinsic to the main purpose, which is winning. In the latter, in contrast, they count in the scoring and may indeed be significant in the performance of equally strong athletes, allowing one to win over the other.

In an aesthetic sport such as figure skating, the line between sport and art can be especially difficult to draw. Reid, for example, asked whether figure skating could be clearly distinguished from dancing on ice (1970: 257). Wertz investigated this issue by examining the performances of, among others, the American skater Peggy Fleming and especially her winning free programme at the 1968 Grenoble Olympics, which he saw as a landmark in the development of a stronger artistic streak within competitive skating.¹¹ He argued that:

The routines which she performed were controlled by aesthetic assessments. In observing these routines, one could see that they were more than just physical or athletic; they had an extra 'something' added to them, which we would usually speak of as supplying a coherence and fluency to her moves. The individual moves were performed and coordinated by a gracefulness consciousness imparted by the performer. [...] Aesthetic skating from Fleming on requires the individual moves to be linked – part of a continuum or unbroken unity of the entire routine. In light of this, Fleming's performances were rightfully described as 'artistic' (Wertz 1985b: 514).

Whether one agrees with philosopher Peter Arnold's argument that 'when objects are perceived aesthetically, they are perceived in a *particular way for their own sake*' (Arnold 1990: 162) or whether one wants to engage in the philosophical debate of the differences between the 'aesthetic' and the 'artistic' or not, one cannot escape that, in the mind of many people the distinction between sport and art is there. *Journalist* and historian of skating, Dennis Bird, commented in his obituary of John Curry that:

As a small child he was overwhelmed by his first visit to a musical. It became his lifelong ambition to be a dancer – only to be met by a firm 'no' from both parents. Dancing, they thought, was unsuitable for a boy. At that crucial period, aged six, he saw a television broadcast of the ice-show Aladdin and an interview with its star, Jacqueline du Bief. 'I want to go skating,' he said, and to his surprise his mother¹² agreed. He never knew why skating was acceptable and dancing was not (Bird 1994)

¹¹ It is worth noting therefore that in 1976 for the first time the Winter Olympic Winter Games held that year in Innsbruck, Austria, included ice dancing within the official programme.

¹² That it is his mother, rather than his father that agreed is significant as is it quite common in Western families for mothers to encourage artistic practice. Indeed, Bird also comments that to his death in 1965, Curry's father was not reconciled to his son being a skater, and that Curry started taking ballet classes only after the death of his father. What is important, however, that whilst skating might not be a 'proper' career it was more acceptable than one in dance.

As Curry put it himself ‘ice skating was protected under the umbrella of sport’ (in BBC 1987). Curry’s training was undoubtedly artistic and balletic, right from the beginning. The advice given to him by his first teacher Ken Vickers of ‘straight back, bent knees, bottom not out, and head held up’ (BBC 1987), for example, is one of the staples of the dance studios.

Curry’s greatest desire after his sporting career was over was not to get a contract from one of the traditional ice shows, but rather was to form an ice dance company that would bring professional ballet standards to the skating world and reveal the possibilities of the rink to the ballet world. Indeed, when asked in an interview in 1987 by journalist Barry Davies ‘Was being the best male skater in the world a means to an end rather than an ends itself?’ Curry answered that he had ‘to prove himself in the most visible and accepted way which was winning the Olympics’ and he argued that he ‘set up to do that in order to be able to do what [he] did later’ (BBC 1987). He trained skaters in his own classical style, and brought his show, *Theatre of Skating*, to the Cambridge Theatre in London in 1976, returning with *Theatre of Skating II* in 1977 at the London Palladium. After touring throughout the world, performing among other places at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, the company returned to London in 1984 to perform at the prestigious Royal Albert Hall (Blakey 2010). It is interesting to see how critics presented and reviewed the shows. New Yorker Tobi Tobias, for example, wrote:

In the heat of the summer,¹³ on a field of ice laid over the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House, John Curry, a 1976 Olympics gold medalist, tried to prove that skating is an art, closely allied to dancing. In two of his solos [...] he made a good case (1984: 48).

In her book, *Culture on Ice: Figure Skating & Cultural Meaning* (2003), skater and theatre scholar Ellyn Kestnbaum wrote that:

Curry produced a series of ice shows conceived more as high art dance concerts than as family entertainment, performed in legitimate theatre rather than sport arenas. For these shows, Curry worked with well-known choreographers from the world of ballet and modern dance (2003: 114).

Indeed, many of the best-known choreographers of the era from Kenneth MacMillan to Lar Lubovitch and Trisha Brown choreographed for his company. Yet it is also true that part of the ideal of ballet could never be achieved in ice dancing. As Tobias put it: ‘A lady in sturdy lace-up shoes that finish in steely blades is never going to look weightless’ (Tobias 1984: 48).

Curry certainly transformed ice skating and paved the way for skaters like Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean to work from within an ‘artistic’ framework as, for example when they collaborated with cellist Yo-Yo Ma, in his exploration of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello*, by interpreting *Suite No. 6* (Rozema 1997). The barriers between dancing on ice and dancing on land, however, have yet not been removed

¹³ It is worth noting here that the summer is a low season in terms of performance.

and one could argue that it was Curry's close relationship to Royal Ballet dancer Anthony Dowell that opened the doors of the ballet world to him. Furthermore, his company may have performed in 'legitimate' theatres, but his legacy in the 21st century is very different to that left by the great dancers of his era.

Figure Skating and the International Skating Union

Figure skating has a long history within Western competitive sports. The first international figure skating competition took place in Vienna in 1882; within ten years a fully-fledged organisation to regulate the sport, the International Skating Union (ISU), was established. According to its website, this makes it the oldest governing body within the international winter sport federation (ISU 2010). At first, the sport was a male prerogative, and three of the pioneers: the Norwegian Axel Paulsen (1855–1938), the Swedish Ulrich Salchow (1877–1949), and the Austrian Alois Lutz (1898–1918) have been influential in creating a repertoire of jumps, the Axel (Paulsen), the Salchow, and the Lutz, which remain standards of the repertoire and which over the years have become more and more complex, involving extra rotations in the air. Women entered the official competitions in 1906 in Davos, Switzerland; they too were to give names to new figures such as the Ina Bauer taking the name of the German champion of 1957 who invented the move.¹⁴ The championships for pairs were introduced in St Petersburg, Russia in 1908. Figure skating (with events for Ladies, Men, Pairs and Special Figures) was introduced as part of the Olympics in 1908 in London. Later, it became part of the Winter Olympics, first started in 1924 in Chamonix, France. The World Championships in the sport were established in the same year. Ice dancing, as a formal separate branch of figure skating, was introduced in 1976.

The ISU sets up the rules and regulations for 'single and pair skating' and for 'ice dance'. These rules are discussed at regular congresses, held usually every other year with the first one held in Scheveningen in the Netherlands in 1892 and the most recent in Barcelona, Spain in 2010. The manual available from the ISU website as a PDF file, is currently 187 pages long, and comprises 664 rules, with almost half being 'reserved'¹⁵ and therefore not shared in this public document. The rules range from the selection and behaviour of skaters and judges, the shape and size of the ice rink, to what constitute costumes, music, blades and repertoire of movements. Rules 600–664 (ISU 2008: 131–158) are specific to the technical aspects of ice dance. The ice dancing championship structure is that each couple has to perform three dances with different degree of prescribed and original material. Rule 303 states that ice dance 'consists of a) Compulsory dances – skating of prescribed dance(s); b) Original Dance – with prescribed rhythms; and Free Dance). In

¹⁴ Invoking the 'ancestors' so-to-speak through the terminology of the technique is interesting and is different to what happens in theatre dance where history/mythology presents, for example, Marie Taglioni as the first ballerina to go en pointe or Pierina Legnani as the first to perform thirty two fouettés en tournant, but do not use their names. I noticed, however, that the practice of celebrating the creators of step was part of the Venda (South Africa) tradition when I did fieldwork there in the mid-1970s.

¹⁵ Rules 307–334, 338–341, 344–49, 351, 354–357, 359–364, 369–374, 379, 382–392, 395, 398–399, 418–19, 404–408, 421–424, 426–7, 431–435, 437–499, 502–509, 511–512, 514–19, and 523–537.

the compulsory dance, skating execution, composition / choreography, and interpretation / timing are evaluated (ISU 2008: 22–23), whilst in the free and original dances artistic merits are also evaluated.

Rule 302 states that ‘the composition of a pair must be one Lady and one Man’ (ISU 2008: 12). Rule 500 states that the attire of the competitors must be ‘modest, dignified and appropriate for an athletic competition – not garish or theatrical in design’, that ‘men must wear trousers; no tights are permitted’ and that ‘clothing must not give the effect of excessive nudity’. It is noted, however, that clothing may ‘reflect the character of the music chosen’ (ISU 2008: 85).¹⁶ In the compulsory dances skaters are assigned specific steps, with women having more steps moving backward as is the case in ballroom dance, which offered the prototype for the ice dancing movement ‘look’. As Kestnbaum argues: ‘In both compulsory and original dances, the traditional character of specific ballroom dance styles circumscribes the relationship between the partners’ (1995a: 3). As two-time Olympic champion (1948; 1952) Dick Button put it in his 1988 covering of the Winter Olympics, ‘You know, the story of ice dancing is really the same every year. It’s the battle of the sexes. He tames her, but it isn’t easy’ (in Kestnbaum 1995a: 3). As the sport moved away from ballroom/social towards ballet/art, the classical *pas de deux* became a further inspiration for ice dance choreographers. Rule 513 defines pair skating as ‘the skating of two persons in unison who perform their movements in such harmony with each other as to give the impression of genuine Pair Skating as compared with independent Single Skating’ and that ‘Attention should be paid to the selection of an appropriate partner’, but no criteria of ‘appropriateness’ are given (ISU 2008: 93). ‘Unison and oneness’ are among the evaluating criteria of pair skating as well as the ‘spatial awareness between partners’ (ISU 2008:113), whilst under the Ice Dancing regulations it is stated that ‘The Couple should skate as close together as possible keeping a constant distance between them’ (ISU 2008: 144).

The ‘free’ dance is also framed by rules and must include required elements as well as overall stylistic instructions. For example, the regulations state that ‘Lifts should enhance the music chosen and express its character and should be performed in an elegant manner without obvious feats of strength and awkward and/or undignified actions and poses’ which contrasts to the more acrobatic lifts of Pair Skating (ISU 2008:138) and there are many ‘illegal’ movements. For instance ‘sitting or standing on the partner’s shoulder’ is not allowed (ISU 2008: 139). All three dances are evaluated using a most complex system, incomprehensible for the non-initiated. Rule 353.i, for example, states:

In Ice Dance, combination Lifts are evaluated as one unit by adding the base values of the two first executed types of lifts, multiplying the result by 0.8 and afterwards applying the GOE [Grade of Execution] with the numerical value of the most difficult type of lift. The factored base value of the combination lift will be rounded to two decimal places (ISU 2008: 21).

¹⁶ It is interesting that the rule ‘Ladies must wear skirts’, valid in 1992–1993 (Kestnbaum 1995a, 1), is no longer current.

Neoprimitivism in ice dancing: Oksana Domnina and Maxim Shabalin's 2009–2010 routine

The Russian skaters, Domnina and Shabalin, and their coaches choreographed the routine I want to examine now, as their original dance for the Russian Nationals for the 2009–2010 season held in St Petersburg in December 2009. They used it in January 2010, for the 2010 European Figure Skating Championships in Tallinn, Estonia, for which they were awarded gold¹⁷, and for the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada in February 2010, for which they were awarded bronze.¹⁸ It is publicly available for viewing on the skaters' official website (Domnina & Shabalin 2010).

The couple originally trained in Russia with Alexei Gorshko, but in 2008 they moved to the USA to train under Natalia Linitchuk and Gennadi Karpanossov as it was felt that 'the ice dancers needed new input and would have better chances at the Olympic Games' under the tutelage of new coaches (Flade 2008). The theme for the original dance in 2010 was folk/country dance. Rule 609 of the ISU states that:

The Original Dance is the skating by a Couple of a dance of their own creation to dance music they have selected for the designated rhythms. The Original Dance must reflect the character prescribed of the dance rhythm(s) and be translated to the ice by demonstrating technical skill with steps and movements along with flow and the use of edges (ISU 2008: 148).

As Kestnbaum noted:

Skaters (and their coaches) know that, like it or not, skaters are judged on their image, and part of putting together a competitive program means packaging their image with professional choreography, music recording, and costuming in the interest of constructing a performance that will generate approval from judges and fans' (1995b: 55–56).

According to journalist Tatiana Flade '[Domnina and Shabalin] searched for a long time' and 'were looking at different choices. [They] wanted to do something new and unusual and Natalia Vladimirovna (Linichuk) suggested this music' (Flade 2010). In an interview following their first performance of the dance, they commented:

We wanted to surprise everyone by our dance. We did not want to create another Slavic dance and have considered a lot of options, including Scottish folk. But eventually we settled on this one. I guess it really makes everyone stop and take the notice (in Kondakova 2009).

¹⁷ They came second in both the original and free dances but the high number of points gained for the compulsory dance for which they 'delivered by the far the most precise dance of the competition' (Kondakova 2010a) gave them the advantage.

¹⁸ They did not attend the 2010 World Championship in Turin in March 2010 as they stopped competing after the Olympics.

According to their website, they wanted to recreate on the ice ‘moments of everyday’s life in an Aboriginal tribe’ (Domnina & Shabalin 2010).¹⁹ Little did they imagine that their dance would create a controversy. Indeed, soon after the competition journalist Anna Kondakova commented that they gave a ‘solid performance’, but that the routine was ‘perceived as inappropriate by a few’ (Kondakova 2009). Over the next few months, as they were given wider coverage as they moved up the competition ladder, the controversy grew.

The skaters designed their costumes and make up to reflect the mood of their programme. They took to the ice with their face painted with designs reminiscent more of the makeup of Broadway show *The Lion King* than of Aboriginal designs, and wearing red loincloths over brown body suits²⁰ adorned with white geometric motifs and green leaves. The music, an arrangement by Alexander Goldstin included whooping, rhythmic chanting, shouting, and a didgeridoo, but also rhythmic syllables used in south Indian Carnatic music,²¹ among other sounds. The routine started with what the skaters must consider to be ‘tribal’ movements. In the starting pose, Shabalin with his back to Domnina, stands with legs apart, knees bent, in a semi hunched position, whilst Domnina crouches on the floor. Whilst the routine uses a largely typical figure skating vocabulary imposed by the competition, the overall impression throughout is the lack of an upright body, therefore reinforcing a primate-like rather than human stance.²² Writer Patty English remarked:

The first 20 seconds of the routine are straight out of the 1920s and 1930s club performances of Blacks before white audiences. It smacks of the old minstrel show and discrimination new and old [...]. The routine seems to resemble a parody or cartoon’ (English 2010).

For the Olympic presentation, the costumes were lighter and the face make up removed.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation News quoted Sol Bellar, a member of the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, saying ‘We see it as stealing Aboriginal culture and it is yet another example of the Aboriginal people of Australia being exploited’

¹⁹ It is worth noting here that the Australian skaters *Danielle O’Brien and Greg Merriman had done an Aboriginal dance for the World Championship in 2008 – in which Domnina and Shabalin did not compete – in which they came 24th*, not making it through to the top 20. This meant they were not allowed to perform their Free Dance. O’Brien and Merriman used the routine again for the 2009–2010 Four Continents Championships, held in Korea in January 2010 (this is an annual competition established in 1999 by the International Skating Union to provide skaters representing countries outside Europe with a competition on par with the long established European Championship) where they gained the 10th place and at The World championships In Turin, Italy in March 2010 where they came 26th, therefore once again missing the finals. Australian skating commentator and former gold medallist, Belinda Noonan argued: ‘I don’t think there’s any integrity to the Russians’ dance, and given Danielle and Greg performed their version some time ago, it’s at the very least suspicious where they got their inspiration’ (in Reilly 2010).

²⁰ Shabalin’s costume was much darker than Domnina’s.

²¹ Including, it seems elements from the British Indian performer Sheila Chandra (Reilly 2010).

²² In contrast in my work, I noted the importance of verticality in dance among the Tiwi of Northern Australia (Grau 2003: 2005).

(Reuters 2010). Bev Manton, an Aboriginal leader, chairperson of the same council, writing in the Australian daily *The Sydney Morning Herald* complained:

From an Aboriginal perspective, this performance is offensive. It was clearly not meant to mock Aboriginal culture, but that does not make it acceptable to Aboriginal people. There are a number of problems with the performance, not least of all the fact both skaters are wearing brown body suits to make their skin appear darker. That alone puts them on a very slippery slope (2010).

Some 69 people responded to the article until the newspaper closed the discussion on the 25th January. A few supported Manton, but many more criticised her. She was told ‘Good grief, grow up will ya’ by Bozo²³ in Scotland; that she needed ‘a holiday’ because ‘the routine was at a national competition, not a back-yard barbeque of red-necks’ by Lightenupbev in Sydney; that she should ‘Get a grip’ as her ‘attitude fails to recognise an obviously sympathetic and respectful performance because that wouldn’t suit [her] political motivations’ by *Rickrocksoz*; that she should ‘Get the chip off [her] shoulder and stop being oversensitive’ by BenL in Xiamen; and that she had a ‘pathetic attitude ... to a perfectly legitimate performance’ by zac48 in Melbourne. She was described as ‘a very narrow minded person’ by Martin in the UK and advised to ‘be more open to interpretation and less paranoid’ by Arnold in Sydney.²⁴ The moderator edited a number of posts, possibly because they were even more offensive than what is listed above.

Journalist Madeleine Coorey interviewed Stephen Page for the French news agency *Agence France Press*. Page is the artistic director of the Bangarra Dance Company, the Sydney based indigenous group, and choreographer of the Sydney Olympics opening ceremony. He had viewed a video of the dance shortly after it was performed at the Russia Nationals and described it as ‘stupid’, arguing that ‘Probably the elders in the bush would be laughing because they would be saying, “Look how stupid these fellas are” because they’ve got it all wrong. All the elements are wrong’ (in Coorey 2010).

The *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* picked up the story on the 22nd January after ‘First Nations leaders in B.C. [said] they want[ed] to talk to [...] the Russian skating champions about [their] ice dance routine that Australian Aborigines are calling cultural theft’ (CBC News 2010). This news item attracted some 228 comments in less than three hours. Many were on par with the ones posted to *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Quite a few, however, had a more critical stance towards the skaters and against the Olympics generally, often being rather patronising. *SCSCS* for example argued: ‘Don’t think Domnina and Shabalin and their choreographer were being ironic, just ignorant and unsophisticated’; Benson 2175 thought that ‘The Russians aren’t familiar with our strict Political Correctness Laws’; whilst Pivoine posted: ‘It now looks like these two idiots were brought up with no respect

²³ The names used in the web-forum posts are pseudonyms.

²⁴ Full comments can be found on The Sydney Morning Herald site <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/russian-ice-dancers-should-rethink-their-routine-20100121-mnwj.html?comments=69#comments>.

for anything... I'm certain they just don't understand, let alone care'; and IdiotOneBC described the Olympics as 'the granddaddy of cultural theft and tackiness'.²⁵

Journalists in the United Kingdom also followed the controversy, with *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* both publishing stories (Harding 2010; Lewis 2010, respectively). Jemima Lewis, writing on the 23rd of January, took a slightly different angle to the discussion and argued:

Anything originating with a particular people – a dance, a mode of dress, a style of cooking – could be considered on a par with the Elgin Marbles. To imitate it is to plunder it, with all the arrogance of the colonial explorer. [...] This is, of course, a devilishly difficult principle to police. In the age of globalisation, we have grown so accustomed to nicking each other's ideas that we hardly even know we're doing it. The British wolf down curry and pasta; the Bhutanese follow the Premier League; Indians listen to rap music; and absolutely everyone, the world over, wears jeans. Do we owe the American cowboy an apology for appropriating his traditional work wear?

This article attracted some 40 posts. Again many were dismissive. Merv Cripps felt that 'we have far too many people with far too much time on their hands who are "professionally offended"'; whilst Christopher Holland argued that 'The professional grievance industry has trained its Aboriginal students well – they have spent years learning that if you don't have a real grievance then a fake one does just as well'. DC in contrast argued:

Let the Russians and everyone else in the world leave Aboriginal culture well alone. Let it rot in the Australian outback, where it richly belongs and, more to the point, where no one will notice it. And when the Aboriginals get tooth ache or piles or other ailments, let them go to their witch-doctors for a cure, and not to those evil white doctors who treat them at great expense to the Australian taxpayer.²⁶

After the complaints Domnina and Shabalin's coach, Natalia Linichuk, responded to the accusations and argued:

Aboriginal, it translates from Latin language, it's from the beginning. We try to represent a picture of this time when aboriginal people start being in the world. It's no customs, no country, nothing (Reuters 2010).

Whilst Domnina and Shabalin themselves told the press agency Reuters: 'We researched a lot of information on the Internet. It's just from many thousands of years ago and it wasn't our goal (to be authentic)' (CBC News 2010).

²⁵ Full comments can be found at <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/british-columbia/story/2010/01/22/bc-russian-skaters-aboriginal-olympics.html#socialcomments>.

²⁶ All the comments can be read in full on The Daily Telegraph site at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/jemima-lewis/7063209/The-Russians-who-skated-into-a-minefield.html>.

Concluding remarks

Although my analysis covers only a small sample of the comments made throughout the world on the routine, a number of themes emerge around issues of representation, discrimination, and racism. Figure skating is seen as a world where ‘tacky’ and ‘kitsch’ costumes are the norm. The Russian skaters should therefore be forgiven for their unfortunate choice of costumes. Coming from such a world, they should not be expected to be intellectually sophisticated and understand issues of representation, so criticising their routine is taking political correctness too far and does not take into account that the skaters were ‘honouring’ Aboriginal culture. It worth noting here, however, that when the Australians, Danielle O’Brien and Greg Merriman, similarly chose an Aboriginal dance for their original dance in 2008 and again in 2010²⁷ their costumes were directly derived from central Australian designs and similarly their music was taken from contemporary Australian musicians Scott Wilson, James Drury, and David Hudson.²⁸ When asked about their dance, O’Brien said:

We worked with the people and made sure we did not offend cultural differences. We certainly did not want to arouse the reaction the Russians got. We did this dance the last time folk and country was chosen. We consulted them and asked about the dancing. It is true that only men perform the religious dances not the women but there are family dances. We asked and made certain that we were doing nothing to offend. Our costumes were made by Thullii²⁹ (Rossano 2010).

O’Brien and Merriman’s choreography had a more ‘authentic’ feel than that of Domnina and Shabalina. Indeed, they are said to have spent about a year working on the original material to develop a quality of movement that would do justice to those who inspired them. From my own experience working on Aboriginal dance since the 1980s, I would agree that they have gone some way towards this. In contrast to the Russian skaters’ hunched bodies, the Australians earthbound dynamic quality was closer to the characteristic found in many Australian Aboriginal dance genres, whereby the low centre of gravity gives a tension comparable to a tightly bound spring, ready to explode at any moment. From a dance/choreographic perspective, it is therefore unfortunate that they were not sufficiently skilled skaters to reach the Olympics, but we are dealing with a competition where choreography is only a small element.

The overall issue for me, however, is that it is clear that for many, indigenous people have no claim to ‘copyright’ and that their cultural production can be plundered and misinterpreted. Indeed they should be grateful that anyone is ‘generous’ enough to

²⁷ The Russians did not compete at these events as they were not eligible for the Four Continents event; by the time the 2010 World Championship took place, they had retired.

²⁸ Yulara by Scott Wilson and James Drury, Warrama by David Hudson and Kikin Kooka’s by Scott Wilson and James Drury.

²⁹ Thullii Dreaming is a Sydney-based company owned and run by indigenous people. It offers courses in Aboriginal culture, has a dance company Thullii Dancers and other business ventures (see <http://www.thullii.com.au/>).

take notice of them. This kind of generally accepted attitude led to the creation of bodies such as the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) in 1967 to set up, among other things, mechanisms for the protection of unpublished anonymous works. One of the mandates of WIPO is to inform, protect, promote and preserve traditional knowledge and cultural expressions. It is therefore saddening that over 40 years later so little of this information seems to have filtered through to people. Australian Aboriginal people are not seen as 21st century citizens of the world. They can only be Stone Age peoples, relics from the past who somehow stopped in their evolution 40,000 years ago. As Page put it to *Agence France Presse*, it looked ‘...like [Domnina and Shabalin] were trying to emulate the token savage cave man’ (in Coorey 2010).³⁰ One may consider that the controversy was a storm in a teacup, as indeed an Australian friend contended when I asked him, in the sense that in relation to the spoliation of their land, their health and social problems, a skating routine misrepresenting Australian Aborigines seems rather innocuous. I would argue, however, that it highlights the racism of individuals who believe themselves to be liberal and non-racist, and that it should be recognised as such.

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³⁰ Considering the debate, it is fascinating to know that Maxim Shabalin was competing on the Russian Television show *Ice and Fire* with Ekaterina Vilkoova in the autumn of 2010 and his official website stated that on Week 3 they ‘performed a dance of the North American Indians, to the music of ‘Last of the Mohicans’ (http://en.domnina-shabalin.ru/news/ice_and_fire_week_3/2010-10-04-66). Whilst the routine is certainly less offensive than the Aboriginal dance discussed here, it is not without its clichés. The dance can be seen on the television archive at <http://www.itv.ru/videoarchive/24602>).

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POVZETEK

V prispevku obravnavam številne teme, ki so pomembne tako za antropologijo nasploh kot tudi za antropologijo plesa. Dotikam se vprašanj klasifikacije in taksonomije, medkulturnosti in transnacionalizma, reprezentacije, eksotizacije in ponotranjenja rasizma. Proučujem ples, hierarhije in diskriminacije ter razpravljam o mejah med plesom in neplesom. Teoretiki plesa le redko pišejo o umetnostnem drsanju, čeprav je ta soroden zahodnim gledališko plesnim žanrom in še posebej baletu. Umetnostno drsanje je šport, tudi v svoji inkarnaciji plesa na ledu, medtem ko je ples vedno viden kot umetnost, tudi v svoji inkarnaciji tekmovalnega baleta. V tem kontekstu se lotim študije primera ruskih drsalcev Oksane Domnina in Maxima Shabalina, ki sta kot izvirno točko na Evropskem prvenstvu v drsanju leta 2010 in na olimpijskih igrah prikazala avstralski aboridžinski ples. S tem nastopom sta užalila aboridžinske starešine, ki so podali pritožbo ruskemu veleposlaniku. V članku proučujem polemike okoli te točke, kako je bila predstavljena v medijih in kako so se občinstva nanjo odzvala na internetnih forumih, pri čemer se osredotočam predvsem na načine, kako so avstralski domorodci v popularnih medijih še vedno prikazani, kot da živijo v kameni dobi.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: estetika, Aboridžini, balet, internetni forumi, ples, drsanje, taksonomije

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