

Artistic Legitimation in Canadian Dance: An Analysis and Application

Sonya Singh

Department of Theatre, Dance & Performance, York University

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Dr. Bridget Cauthery

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The concept of legacy is as much a historic phenomenon as it is an intrinsic, evolutionary motivation. In nature, seasons follow each other. Humans conform to one another. Even ancient works of art are survived by future iterations. Canadian choreographer and artistic director, Crystal Pite, delivered this very sentiment in her 2016 piece “The Season’s Canon,” presented and commissioned by the Paris Opera Ballet (POB). Legacies do not simply anchor an artist’s worth in the present, nor are they products of the past. They continue to influence the unravelling of future histories. Considering this, I have analyzed Pite’s choreography within the frame of artistic legitimisation; that is, the social hierarchy of norms and resources that are embedded within creation, performance, and adjudication processes. I will argue that *The Season’s Canon* provides evidence for artistic legitimisation by leveraging eurocentric and heteronormative ideals to promote its own legacy. Additionally, I synthesize literature findings in cultural psychology with my own real-world observations to answer the following questions: what is the criteria for legitimate art and who has the privilege of determining it? In what contexts does artistic legitimacy take place and what historical events helped produce them? Is *The Season’s Canon* leading or following the legacy of artistic legitimisation in Canadian dance?

Choreographer Background

Born in Terrace, British Columbia, Crystal Pite established her roots in ballet and contemporary at *Ballet BC* when she was 17 (Meyers & Linde Howe-Beck, 2012). She trained for 8 years with notable artists such as William Forsythe, David Earle, and John Alleyne, until expanding her capacity as a choreographer for *Ballet BC* (1996), *Ballet Jorgen* (1992-98), and *Alberta Ballet* (1993, 1995). The bond she formed with Forsythe motivated her to train with *Ballet Frankfurt* in Germany, planting the seed for future collaborations with her own

company, *Kidd Pivot*. Founded in 2001, the theatre- and dance-based company grew in demand in Canada for its hybrid approach to exploring consciousness, trauma, and mortality. By 2010, the company toured in 22 cities with over 75 performances, eventually settling in Vancouver and Germany as the resident *Kunstlerhaus Mousonturm* company. Prior to being commissioned in 2016, *Kidd Pivot's* “Betroffenheit” and “The Tempest Replica” received many accolades for its set design, costuming, lighting, and projections; the same qualities that would later attract audiences to *The Season's Canon*. From this information, one can deduce that POB's decision to commission Pite was not made in isolation, but was acted on by 30 years of popularity, experience, and positive criticism. At its height, *The Season's Canon* was awarded the 2016 Prix Benois de la Danse, one of the most prestigious awards for contemporary choreography as it is judged by an international panel of ballet leaders.

Piece Background

Creation and Historical Context

In order to capture the entire message behind Pite's piece, it is important to place ourselves, the audience, at its historical and creative genesis. Under the artistic direction of Benjamin Millepied, The POB commissioned Pite to create a new work for their 2016 season's opening gala. Millepied took a “glamorous, American-style” approach to the events to attract sponsors and donors (Sulcas, 2016). Keeping on-brand, *The Season's Canon* included an ethereal graphic backdrop (designed by Jay Gower Taylor & Tom Visser) and flattering sheer costumes that exposed the dancer's bare chests (designed by Nancy Bryant) (Pacific Northwest Ballet). The company prides itself on being the oldest dance school in the world, using rigorous traditions and work ethic to shape its esteemed classical ballet foundations (Dance House). Anxious about meeting the expectations of the high-calibre environment, Pite

grounded herself with reflections on nature, human connection, and Max Richter's *Recomposed*— a contemporary reimagining of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. To work efficiently with the 54-member company whom she was only newly acquainted with, Pite had to “work big” with grand sequential movements or canons. She later narrowed her focus to groups, duets, and solos as the piece — and her own interpersonal connections with the dancers — progressed. Put together, the elements of set design, music, and phrasework that catalyzed her creative journey also informed the rest of the piece's movement vocabulary, thematic development, and audience engagement.

Movement Quality

The choreography executed awe-striking, “ecstatic and pleasing” (Sulcas, 2016) canons that were so precise and yet natural, it could be best defined as a human murmuration; flocks of bodies swelled the space with tensionless and expansive arms, tapering off one after another from the interlocked group, as if every individual was riding the same train of thought. This was contrasted by a second movement vocabulary that was geometric, mundane, and restricted to distinct patterns and pathways. For example, head jerks, sharp reaches, precise arm placements, and strongly rooted, bent legs were repeated to a ritualistic degree. As the dance funnelled down into large-group sections, duets, and solos, new ideas of heteronormativity and eurocentrism emerged. The men's large-group choreography utilized athletic jumps and fast pacing to highlight their individual physicality, whereas the women's slow, airy movements were in contact with one another, denoting an emotional quality of compassion and languor. To add on, duets between men and women were characterized by threading phrases, momentum, weight transferring, and spiraling lifts with the majority of them performed by men. When briefly separated, the partners faced one another in a low and wide

stance with billowing arms, as if asserting their dominance. At its core, colonialist dance forms like ballet and contemporary idealize taking up space, asserting authority, refining and taming, and rigidity (Rebhorn, 2012; see also Kealinohomoku, 2001). Evidently, the focus on social conformity using canons and phrasework kept the piece on par with its title and theme of legacy. Because movement vocabulary writes the storyline of a piece, choreographic elements predisposed with heteronormative and eurocentric norms can impact the reading of its themes.

Dramaturgical Elements

The unfolding of legacy captured in the piece's title physically manifests as repeated canons. Ensemble-wide phrasework helped establish a collective identity, making the eventual dissolution into groups and solos more evocative. The body of the piece had a sense of venturing out, of exploring the tension between an individual and its respective group which Pite compares to the way we exist in real life. In an effort to preserve their individual legacy and uniqueness, the ensemble concludes by bowing their contracted bodies to the ground to reveal a lone dancer performing a pattern of sharp hand movements across their face and torso. The closing image begs the question if individual legacy is a realistic goal or if it can only be attained by conforming to the group. It encourages audiences to empathize with the challenge of abandoning expectations and history's unilateral trajectory. In the pre-show interview hosted by ARTE France (2024), Pite questions "[Are] we a sealed self or are we in connection with everything that is?" In accordance with this, the restlessness and rigidity of the outlier's movements encapsulates the struggle that individuals have when establishing their place in history; an obstacle that makes abiding to stereotypes and derivatives an easier and safer option. How, then, do choreographers secure success and place themselves in the same path of dominoes that fell before them? How did Pite endeavour to create a legacy for her piece?

Although Pite chose Max Richter's *Recomposed* to be the beating heart of *The Season's Canon* because it "lends itself really well to the subject of creation," what we see is not creativity. Rather, we see derivative choices that marry phrasework to melodies, choreographic shifts to transitions in the 8-piece musical score, and movement vocabularies to hegemonic values that POB and other prestigious platforms subscribe to. Framed by past literature, it becomes increasingly clear how a piece's legitimacy is scaffolded by historical, cultural, and psychological factors.

Critical Framing and Analysis

Literature Review

Just as Pite followed the legacy of Forsythe and Richter followed Vivaldi, the term artistic legitimacy has a lineage of its own. Baumann's (2007) general theory posits that art becomes legitimate through a three-pronged process of finding sociopolitical opportunities, mobilising resources, and justifying one's claims based on past ideologies. Artistic legitimisation is a reciprocal action of mirroring one's environment and achieving consensus. In particular, societal shifts offer opportunities for engagement as the cracks between the fracturing bedrock ideologies make space for more discourse. Economic changes, reduced discrimination, and rapid industrialization are some of the ways society has opened its jaws to digest new artistic evolutions. For example, jazz music garnered higher status and acceptance around the same time Black rights were being contended with. However, not all people or groups have equal access to the conversations or resources that determine legitimate art.

One source explains that legitimacy is dependent on how well one can materialize the most precedent social norms using physical elements of artmaking; these include paintbrushes, canvases, stages, rehearsal spaces, dancewear, props, or instruments (Cnossen & Bencherki,

2023). Because marginalized groups (e.g., socioeconomically-disadvantaged, racial minorities, etc) have less access to these elements, they are not as able to interact with audiences, partake in social dialogue, and make claims for why their art should be accepted. A more incarnate way that social norms materialize is through the lack of representation. After all, it is difficult to mirror one's environment if the only thing reflected back at you is an indifferent majority of toned bodies, flat chests, and light skin. The cast of Pite's piece perpetuated eurocentric hierarchies by reflecting only white, cis-het social norms and bodies. Inherent in this literature review is how artistic legitimisation is underscored by classist and eurocentric factors.

What complicates this further are the entwined intangible and psychological constructs. According to cultural psychology research, Eastern collectivistic cultures are more likely to value spirituality, family obligations, interdependence, and non-verbal communication (Heine, 2020). On the other hand, individualism is more prominent in the West, as seen in the emphasis on mental health, agency, self-expression, career pursuits, and of course, legacy. Moreover, humans engage in what is known as a similarity and prestige bias, whereby people are more likely to follow those with shared demographics and of higher authority. Although the bias originally promoted evolution and protection, it merely facilitates unjust artistic legitimisation in modern day. Contemporary pieces tend to be legitimized because its audience, being of white majority, resonates more with the individualistic theme of legacy and an all-white cast; as opposed to alternative/folk/street styles of dance that are more practiced by and performed within minority communities. Of particular interest is how one uncovers the criteria that choreographers use, albeit implicitly, to tailor their piece to dominant preconceptions with hopes of being recognized/legitimized.

A Criteria for Artistic Legitimacy

Parsing this complex criteria begins with identifying the individual variables and demographic factors involved in legitimization. Supplementing Baumann's triarchic theory of artistic legitimization, I propose that the key to artistic legitimacy is to make something memorable with awe, presence, and stillness. Cognitive psychologists have found that people recall the first and most recent ideas when performing memory tasks, a phenomenon known as the primacy and recency effect (Cavanagh & Feldman, 2022). When choreographers bookend their piece with recurring motifs—as did Pite with her recurring rigid arm patterns, heteronormative pairings, and canon sequences—they take advantage of our cognitive shortcomings, thereby increasing the memorability and legacy of their piece. What is interesting about the construct of awe is that it exists on a continuum with presence and insignificance at each end. Stage presence is a colloquial term that is loosely defined, though popular sources coalesce on its ability to attract and keep audiences attention by embracing vulnerability (Zuckerman, 2007).

This reciprocal exchange of ideas between audiences and performers has been documented throughout history, though rarely from the performer's perspective. Black, queer, and Indigenous groups experienced the dehumanizing effects of ventriloquism and black minstrelsy that controlled and tainted the public's understanding of their experiences. The only way they were accepted in the public sector was if they performed the "rigid movements" of eurocentric dance practices or if they cooperated with the puppeting of white directors/choreographers. If sustaining awe and providing entertainment was the socially-prescribed livelihood of lower-status people, then standing still, gaze strong, chests lifted, shoulders wide, was the stance of significance. In other words, the prototype of presence was dichotomized to give privilege to higher socioeconomic and racial classes. Pite's choice to

work big not only required a unified whole, but it also implied that the illusion would only be effective with an absence of difference; an absence of racial diversity and of ethnic differences in body shapes. Knowing that we are biased towards socially-acceptable and similar ideas, it stands to reason that audiences revered the choreographic aesthetic of Pite's work because it leveraged both physical and abstract ideas of eurocentricity. These historical circumstances created hierarchies that allowed white voices to define what has presence and significance, and *The Season's Canon* simply followed suit. The irony here is that the piece desired legacy, and unfortunately a legacy of eurocentrism is what it perpetuated.

Past and Present Environments

Moving from the myopic to the broader social context surrounding this analysis, I question, in what environments does artistic legitimacy take place and what historical events helped produce these environments? The literature review foreshadows the relationship between our culture, value systems, and perception. It is important to distinguish dance in Canada from non-Western contexts because individualistic cultures prioritize independent goals and values. This sharply contrasts previous theories about legitimate art functioning to fill a social void and mirror its environment. Herein lies a paradox, a hypocrisy reminiscent of the burgeoning salvage ethnography of the 20th century that Lingred wrote about (2013). Why was Basquiat's street art only valued when framed in Warhol's exhibits? Why was Hip Hop only legitimized when measured on a contemporary criteria and placed on a competitive stage? It is because social and street styles were the invasive species to the high-art world, and the only way to live in "harmony" was to domesticate them. Because competitive or professional stages like the POB are more concerned with maintaining their individual success than supporting social endeavors, they maintain a legacy that is indifferent and exclusive.

This course presented more examples of choreographers who were indoctrinated into their cultural and sociopolitical environments. Rampant in both the case of Volkoff's Olympic Games performance and Pite's creation is the surrendering to discriminatory standards set by governing bodies; whether that be the German government dictating the perceptions of Indigenous folk dance or the POB's privileging of eurocentric casts and themes (Cauthery, 2026). Furthermore, the residual effects of this ideology has impacted current dance education and adjudication, whereby 'rigidity' is synonymous with moments of stillness/stage presence and its antithesis is equated with non-eurocentric movement qualities (Martin, 2017). This circular definition of legitimate art continues to exclude social/street styles, such as hip hop, vernacular jazz, tap, and folk dances. It was not until the late 20th century that Black people reclaimed their bodily autonomy and culture through The Creole Show, Harlem renaissance, and Katherine Dunham's afro-diasporic contributions (De Jesus, 2023; King, 2014). In the present day, many more Canadian figures such as Ballet Creole and Zab Mabongou have demonstrated how "the act of dancing leads to a deconstruction of trauma-informed rigidity," also known as embodied activism (De Jesus, 2023). This critical analysis would lack criticality if it did not acknowledge the possibility that *The Season's Canon* may be leading a legacy in addition to following one. Therefore, I call into question other instances in the Canadian dance world where the criteria of artistic legitimacy can be applied.

Application and Comparison

Hypothesis and Design

As Figure 1 summarizes, artistic legitimacy is a measure of awe that exists on a spectrum of presence and insignificance. I translate the criteria to a series of performances at a youth dance competition that I watched as part of my job as a dance teacher. Because my job

affords me access to video archives and judges' scores, I was able to design a non-experimental, naturalistic, concealed observational study by coding the movement vocabulary of six 2-minute dance performances from the predetermined competition categories of *extended-line/solo*, *contemporary/hip hop*, and *competitive/pre-competitive*. In concrete choreographic terms, *presence* can be operationalized as the number of 4 count and 8 count moments of stillness or "holds." *Insignificance* can be operationalized as the number and duration of "filler" runs, which is the use of arbitrary running between sections to maintain audience attention and awe. Second to the variable of awe are the dance's demographic factors; competitive and pre-competitive are compared on the basis of status/prestige, while contemporary and hip hop pieces are compared on the basis of eurocentricity. I chose this particular setting because of its similarities to the historical and cultural context of *The Season's Canon*. A competitive dance setting has adjudicators whose expertise are as informed by cultural values, preconceived notions, and unconscious biases as the audience members at the POB. Instead of Pite appealing to audience and venue standards, enthusiastic dance students meet the demands of their judges. Canons are akin to filler runs. Stage presence is simply static poses. Altogether, my four central hypotheses state that:

1. Competitive dances would be judged higher than pre-competitive dances
2. Contemporary dances would be judged higher than hip hop dances
3. Competitive contemporary dances would be judged the highest
4. Pre-competitive hip hop dances would be judged the poorest.

Participants and Procedure

I ensured that the identity of the dancers in the videos were kept confidential, and only the quantitative data collected from the videos were used in my comparison. I conducted two

conditions: a group condition and a solo condition. Three groups were chosen to represent each demographic: competitive contemporary, pre-competitive contemporary, and pre-competitive hip-hop. The sample was defined by age (13), number of dancers (17), length of piece (2 to 3 minutes) and category (“extended-line”). Solos were chosen to represent each of the same demographics and had consistent ages (14). Unique to the solo condition was the expounded movement vocabulary in order to differentiate between the legitimacy of contemporary and hip hop dances. The premise is that dancers who use ballet-based skills (e.g., kicks, turns, etc.) will outperform other dance forms because they have the privilege of being judged with a criteria that is tailored to their form. As a result, Hip hop and other genres would obtain lower scores because they are not being judged on concepts unique to their form.

Methods and Measures

All data in the group condition was coded using reverse-scoring tallies, that is, any instance resulted in a single point deduction from an initial score of 0. In contrast, the solo condition data was coded positively. The purpose was to reveal that despite having more insignificance (negatively-coded elements), competitive and contemporary dancers came away with higher judges scores due to the facade of awe, prestige, and status (positively-coded elements). This data can be found in Table 1 and 2.

Results

The pre-competitive contemporary group had higher amounts of insignificance (filler runs) than the competitive group, but the competitive group received higher judges scores likely due to its higher levels of presence (holds). This aligns with Hypothesis 1. When comparing the pre-competitive groups in terms of dance genre, hip hop’s lowest judge’s score was one point lower than the contemporary group despite contemporary having a total criteria score that was 9

points lower after combining its presence and insignificance. This indicates that judges were influenced by the false sense of legitimacy that cushions contemporary and delineates hip hop dances. To my surprise, the pre-competitive contemporary soloist had more overall skills than the competitive-contemporary soloist, and yet, they received a lower judges score on average. As long as adjudication processes are biased towards status and prestige, certain individuals will continue to have their effort and skills overlooked. The hierarchy that placed competitive contemporary at the highest, pre-competitive contemporary just below, and pre-competitive hip hop at the lowest, was carried throughout all conditions. It was unfortunate that all of the study's hypotheses were supported, as it implies that this issue persists in several areas of the Canadian dance world.

Conclusion

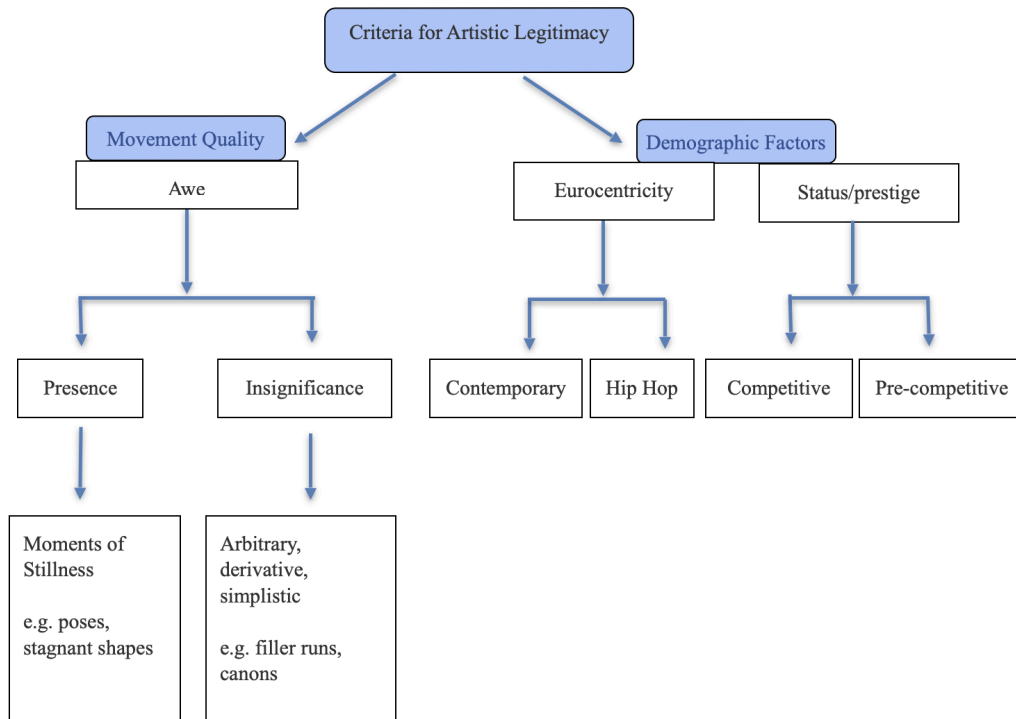
Legacy is like no other force in the way that it overcomes its own obsolescence by invigorating future followings and inspiration. In sum, the characteristics and criteria that differentiates the documented from the undocumented, the legitimate from the insignificant, is a sociopolitical and cultural process. It is outside of one's academic capacities to assume that culture, race, and ethnicity were the sole determinants for the observed differences in this analysis and non-experimental study. Nonetheless, I urge my audience to reflect with me on how societal disparities in the 21st century are often systemic, covert, and subdued to the point of appearing as coincidence. Notwithstanding my oppositional framing of *The Season's Canon*, there is one aspect where Pite and I concur; there is truth to a canon. Coincidences are scarce because everything is a product of something, and people are constantly finding their place in the order of these events. Choreographers such as Pite merely use these experiences as an artistic tool, though even tools can become weapons when wielded waywardly. Role-models can become

our enemies, career fields can turn to cement, and legacies can lead to one-sided legitimacy. Our past and our community can be our anchor, but it can also be the greatest source of bias, discrimination, and ethnocentrism if we do not apply a degree of suspicion to the field we practice in. This analysis can stimulate more holistic approaches when creating and adjudicating dance in Canada today, tomorrow, and in times eternal.

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Figure 1*Criteria for Artistic Legitimacy*

Note. A flow-chart demonstrating the choreographic/movement quality and demographic variables associated with artistic legitimacy. The variable of awe is further operationalized, as well as eurocentricity and status/prestige are divided into specific categories.

Table 1*Group Condition: Age 13, extended-line, 17 dancers*

Criteria	Comp C group	Pre-Comp C	Pre-Comp H group
filler runs (4 cts)	-5	-4	-5
filler runs (8 cts)	0	-8	0
holds (4 cts)	-7	-3	-3
holds (8 cts)	-3	-2	0
Total criteria score	-15	-17	-8
Average Judge's score	94.88	93.36	93.15
Lowest Judge's score	94.83	93	92.7

Note. Competitive (Comp); Pre-competitive (Pre-Comp); Contemporary (C); Hip Hop (H); Counts (cts). Averages are from three anonymous judges at the youth dance competition.

Table 2*Solo Condition: Age 14*

Criteria	Comp C solo	Pre-Comp C solo	Pre-Comp H solo
Holds (4 cts)	-3	-2	-4
Leg Extensions	7	6	0
Jumps	2	4	0
Bridge/Arch	1	1	0
Inversions	2	1	0
Turn	0	1	0
Total criteria score	9	11	-4
Average Judge's score	92.29	91.25	90.68

Note. Competitive (Comp); Pre-competitive (Pre-Comp); Contemporary (C); Hip Hop (H); Counts (cts). Averages are from three anonymous judges at the youth dance competition.