

Bodily Text and the Written Word of Pilates:

A Theoretical Approach to How the Ballerina's Body Concealed and Revealed Problematic Ideologies in an Exercise Practice

Sarah Holmes

ABSTRACT

Pilates instructors, educators, and students while well intentioned, may not understand the troubling rhetoric they unintentionally perpetuate when working with clients. This article suggests that the myth of the ideal body, and the stereotypical gender norms therein, is perpetuated by the Pilates due in part because of its close relationship to the culture of ballet. Pilates contributes to the pursuit and inevitable failure of an unobtainable body. Pilates «(re)produces» the myth of the ideal body through the universal aspect of its “healthy” rhetoric. As a consequence, this article suggests, the exercise practice perpetuates a culture of inadequacy; since many times, abled and differently-abled women who practice Pilates are healthy. This article reveals that the seemingly benign practice of Pilates simultaneously promotes rhetoric of privilege and coercion. It concludes that the teaching practice inadvertently values and perpetuates stereotypical, unrealistic, and unobtainable ideologies of health and well-being.

Keywords: body issues, exercise, gender, sociocultural perspectives, physical fitness

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Much of physical health and well-being is a culture of perception. While seemingly benign, of the commercial images of physical bodies are fabricated, airbrushed, and retouched to resemble the socially and culturally acceptable ideal body. This is not a new practice. The *perception* of physical bodies, in large part, is what inspires many people to begin an exercise routine yet physical bodies approaching the «ideal» require hours (if not years) of physical training, vigilance, and specific financial choices. Practices of self-care are fraught with their own cultural, social, and gendered biases.

This article critically examines the influence of the ballerina's participation in Pilates, revealing through this process the gender and behavioral norms that commonly escape attention.¹ While broad in scope, this article traces how the balletic body shifted Pilates from its origins as a masculine practice into the characteristically «feminized» exercise we know today. The tracing of the ballerina's involvement in Pilates aids in understanding the powerful repercussions of this embodied intersection. The visual appeal of the ballerina's body, and her embodiment of normative white female behaviors, facilitated its public «consumption» in early twentieth-century fitness.² In this respect, the teaching practices or processes through which Pilates is learned, perpetuated, and transformed become critical. Since the 1940s, the ballerina's bodily knowledge has dominated the processes of kinetic and cultural transference in Pilates. This theorization draws attention to how ostensibly heterotrophic Pilates continuously overlooks and normalizes timeworn stereotypes of gender, power, white femininity, able-

bodiedness, and racial superiority. These critical perspectives guide how the seemingly «American-born» fitness trend of Pilates is normalized and cultivated through the marketing of an absorbed balletic body, which continues to «haunt» the practice.

Methodology

Documenting the integration of the ballerina's physicality into the Pilates lineage is complicated; there are no instructional education manuals from the 1930s. Analytical evidence is limited to archival videos, Joseph Pilates' texts, educational manuals, and oral history. Sources providing insight into period-specific movement behaviors, as well as those that shed light on the ballerina's involvement in Pilates, include a notated copy of *Return to Life*, historically relevant trends in ballet pedagogy, and archival footage of Joseph Pilates teaching in his New York studio and at the Jacob's Pillow dance festival. Understood collectively, they inform the historical development of Pilates exercises.

The kinesthetic and social influences of the ballet dancer surface throughout Pilates.³ What can be evaluated more concretely are photos of the commercialized «Pilates body», which surfaced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and their consequent appearance in mainstream American fitness culture.⁴ This article deliberately surveys «at-home how-to» Pilates books, internet images, and images from contemporary fitness magazines. Traces of the balletic body are frequently found in these commercialized Pilates photos. While this type of analysis has been undertaken in sociology and leisure

and fitness studies, dance studies has yet to explore the project of the dancer's kinesthetic presence in Pilates.⁵

To understand the theoretical influence of the ballet dancer in Pilates practice, this work is framed within the academic disciplines of dance studies and «white» feminist theory. While understanding Pilates through fitness and leisure studies is productive, especially with respect to health norms and the adoption of the fitness body, this article undertakes a theoretical analysis through dance studies.⁶ The article develops in multiple sections and relies heavily on the work of Sandra Lee Bartky and Susan Bordo in echoing the sentiment of Rosemary Garland-Thomas that appearance and health norms share similar disciplinary goals.⁷ Additionally, it highlights areas of scholarship that are relevant in contextualizing the images and physical goals of Pilates and concludes by noting the extent to which the industry has continued these practices.

Because the pedagogy of Pilates influences the way in which we understand and consume it, this article bears in mind the multiple ways Pilates is taught and practiced today and reveals how ballet found a foothold in these methodologies. The author's participation as a master instructor in both «classical» and «evolved» Pilates teaching approaches informs this research.⁸ Pilates stands in the shadow of many somatic practices that share similar and somewhat problematic «universal» values of ethical and bodily harmony. This article does not consider or compare itself to the field of somatic practices; rather, it moves forward by localizing its focus to Pilates.¹⁰

The Original Practice of Pilates

The exercise practice of «Contrology» (as Pilates was once known) emigrated to the United States around 1926 and, at the time, was practiced predominately by men. The practice grew from the bedrock of German physical culture, was honed by a pugilist, and privileged the male form. It emphasized exercises

that developed the upper back, shoulders, chest, neck, arms, and abdominal muscles. Contrology broadened a man's shoulders, strengthened his chest and back, and built the militaristic posture.¹¹ Archival photos and videos of Joseph Pilates working with clients illustrate how the exercises strengthen stereotypically «masculine» areas of the body.¹² His infatuation with male perfection bordered on the absurd. Inspired by representations of the ideal Greek and Roman god-like male body, a series of still photographs captured Joseph Pilates and his brother sword-fighting in gladiator-like costumes.¹³

Emphasizing the ideals of the male body is most readily visible in Joseph Pilates' publications *Your Health* (1934) and *Return to Life through Contrology* (1945), the latter of which—littered with his moral perspective—represents the culmination of his life's work. In it, he states that «a perfect balance of body and mind is that quality in civilized man which not only gives him superiority over the savage and animal kingdom but furnishes him with the physical and mental powers that are indispensable for attaining his ultimate goal—health and happiness.»¹⁴ Contextualized, the Pilates idea of the «civilized man» was a white male body, rendering insight into how ideal male bodies behaved as well as the underlying moral and behavioral values of that time.¹⁵ While contemporary analysis considers Pilates to be open and accessible to all bodies, such evaluation is not without fault. The consideration of his writing as merely a product of his historical environment is concerning for its normalization of such problematic values. Yet as time passed, Pilates practice adopted a new socially acceptable, feminine veneer due, in large part, to ballet dancers' kinesthetic involvement. The physical aesthetics of the ballerina and the cultural sharing of spinal verticality, apparent ease, and efficiency of movement deeply affected the performance of Pilates and altered its gendered and physical history.

Tracing and Integrating the Balletic Body in American Physical Culture

The socio-physical norms inherent in the culture of ballet clouded the ahistorical background of Pilates and increased its appeal to women.¹⁶ Peter Fiasca states, «As time passed, certain movement qualities associated with dancers and conventional femininity began to supersede movement qualities associated with non-dancers and conventional masculinity.»¹⁷ In connection with Fiasca's point, similar cultural codes of «proper» behavior of American upper-class white women can be located in the once-popular, late eighteenth- and early twentieth-century American Delsartism.¹⁸ The ballet dancer's presence in the Pilates studio shifted the performance quality of the practice, and by doing so legitimized it for the otherwise «docile» upper-class population. While originally developed to strengthen the musculature of the shoulders, back, chest, and abdominals, its use by the ballerina switched the emphasis of the exercises to the hips and torso and to the overall «elongation» of the torso and body.

Ballet altered the «original» more masculine cultural coding of Contrology. Fiasca asks, «Why has there been a complete reversal in the gender ratio of those who train in [Pilates]? One reason is that during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, increasing numbers of professional dancers, most of them women, began studying with Joseph and Clara Pilates.»¹⁹ In essence, dancers emasculated the practice. By doing so, they created an allowable space for leisure-class women to embrace a traditionally white masculine exercise practice. The emotive comportment and docile behavior of the ballerina was a «safe» identity for white women, both physically and emotionally. Leisure-class women repositioned their Venus-like contrapuntal, sloping shoulders; «elongated» their bodies (thereby squaring off their shoulders); and all the while did not «bulk» or excessively tax their bodies (since this is what health

professionals dictated as the limits of women's bodies at the time).²⁰ Early female practitioners of Pilates masculinized themselves through the practice, while simultaneously gendering its perception.

The sheer number of dancers who influenced Pilates is remarkable. Dancers who sought out Joseph Pilates did so because of injuries that prevented them from dancing. Notable dancers and movement practitioners such as Hanya Holm, Eve Gentry, Maria Tallchief, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Kathy Grant, Irmgard Bartenieff, Alexandra Danilova, Carola Trier, Jerome Robbins, Helen Tamaris, Yvonne Chouteau, Natalia Makarova, and Romana Kryzanowska worked with Pilates.²¹ Deborah Lesson states, «lesser-known dancers studied with [Pilates] and [choreographers] sent injured dancers to 'Uncle Joe,' to be 'fixed.'»²² This is a critically important distinction. In many cases, dancers *had* to attend Pilates and had little money to pay. Oral histories suggest that dancers traded studio

Life Magazine Cover, December 1936. Gathered from <https://www.OLDLIFEMAGAZINES.COM/december-28-1936-life-magazine.html>



work for exercise sessions.²³ Conversely, his leisure-class clientele in the 1930s and 1940s *chose* to see him. The overlapping of these bodies coming and going from his studio proved significant over time. Toward the end of the chronological *Archival Collection* (2000), photographs of women practicing Contrology became more prevalent. Photographs of Hanya Holm and Natalia Makarova, as well as of Joseph Pilates teaching female dancers at Jacob's Pillow, indicate the growing inclusion of female dancers in the practice. Aside from *The Biography* (2013), written proof of his clientele is sparse. However, once the American dance community recognized Joseph Pilates' system of exercise, its popularity in New York City widened.

As more and more dancers visited the studio, Pilates evolved the work to fit their needs.²⁴ These dancers used Pilates for rehabilitation, and their dutiful attendance and public visibility impacted the work to such a degree that it actually changed.²⁵ Fiasca somewhat problematically echoes this sentiment, stating, «his method became increasingly misinterpreted by the dancers who sought out his instruction.»²⁶ Again, this blending cannot be easily traced. There are no educational manuals from this era (aside from Joseph Pilates' publications) that can assist in making these «misinterpretations» visible.²⁷ However, we can employ what is known about the ballet technique and what we know about Joseph Pilates' emphasis on the male body to theorize these changes and their wider implications.

Visibilizing the Ballerina in Pilates

Ballet's culture of perfectionism, the slim body, delicacy, and docile comportment is revealed through images and physical goals of Pilates. The ballerina, who trains her body through silent sacrifice and pain, performs this hidden cost—deceptively displayed as control and effortlessness. The photogenic models appearing in the Pilates images carry traces of the balletic physique.



Fanny Elssler in La Cachicha, 1836 Le Diable Bouiteux (Public domain).

These kinesthetic traces underscore how the images and goals of Pilates reinforce the silent pain of bodily perfectionism through ease, grace, and effortlessness. The obsession with this type of body seems timeworn. Susan Foster's *Choreography and Narrative* (1998) discusses Théophile Gautier's obsession with the ballerina's form. Gautier described ballerina Fanny Elssler as «tall, supple, and well-formed; she has delicate wrists and slim ankles; her legs, elegant and well-turned, recall the slender but muscular legs of Diana, the virgin huntress.»²⁸ Although Elssler's body (Fig. 2) was arguably rotund compared to today's standards, Gautier's attention to the female form is historically illustrative of the aesthetics of femininity in ballet, to which Pilates subscribes. The photogenic models illustrating the Pilates materials carry traces of the delicate balletic physique. These kinesthetic traces underscore how the images and goals of Pilates reinforce bodily perfectionism to its readers.

The traces of the ballerina's body operate on a more disturbing subconscious level in the Pilates images. Most of the time, ballerinas are seen and not heard, and the lack of voice is a distressing characteristic. This seen-but-not-heard idea has been layered into ideal qualities of femininity in the Pilates images. Elizabeth Dempster (1995) discusses how dance, especially ballet, has been perceived as the feminine art form and examines the absence of «voice.» Ballet, through its technique and bodily discipline, posits an ideal to both dancer and audience and governs the presentation and definition of «perfected bodies.»²⁹ If ballet is a movement practice that inscribes patriarchal ideology, then women physicalizing the patriarchal rhetoric of ballet diminish their power.³⁰ This same type of theorizing can be applied to Pilates. According to Dempster, a ballerina's power is perceived rather than real because she has no rights of authorship over ballet's «text.»³¹ She commands her refined body but is powerless to speak. The onlooker or the at-home «how-to» reader is doomed to perpetuate a patriarchal notion of femininity. Contrology was created by a man and was intended for men so that they could exhibit power and control. While the patriarchal exercises of Pilates were commandeered, altered, and reborn through the female ballet dancer's body, its outcome backfired. Pilates continues to exhibit its masculine dominance, ironically and more aggressively through its feminization.

Her emotional command, exhibited in controlled comportment and artistic expression (both traits of the well-behaved woman), is made evident by her artistic communication of ballet's narrative.³² To onlookers, the ballerina's body became the representation of ideal white femininity. Her body, under scrutiny from both the male and female gaze, negotiates between these gazes, challenging them. Sally Banes (1998) states, «the sylph, often characterized simply as an angelic 'ideal woman,' is, as dance historian Erik Aschengreen has pointed out, a complex mixture of fragility, naiveté,

and sexual provocation.»³³ Perrault's seventeenth-century perspective on women maintains that «she should be beautiful, polite, graceful, industrious, properly groomed, and [know] how to control herself at all times... She must be passive until the right man comes along to recognize her virtues and marry her.»³⁴ The stereotypical emotional demeanor of the ballerina shared similarities with socially accepted movement practices like nineteenth-century American Delsartism.³⁵ While twentieth- and twenty-first-century ballets showcase the highly evolved virtuosic skill of ballerinas (i.e., Édouard Lock, *Amelia*), they continue to reproduce the same gendered stereotypes.

George Balanchine, choreographer for the New York City Ballet, famously and problematically stated that «ballet is woman.»³⁶ This idea follows the images of the models in Pilates at-home manuals, furthering a complicated narrative between physicality, desirability, and virtue. Foster (1996) has examined the ballerina's body and its relationship with gender identity and sexual desire. She directs readers' attention to the ballerina's *legs*, one of the predominant areas of the body that Pilates attempts to «lengthen» muscularly. According to her, the legs represent the phallic identity of the ballerina, the heightened *attention* to developing, strengthening, hardening, and slimming.³⁷ This is visible in the Pilates images and is largely due to the aesthetic of the ballerina's legs. Foster states that «their astonishing straightness, length, and the flexibility of hip and thigh muscles that permits their extreme separation from one another contrast with the supple, softly flowing arms and arching torso.»³⁸ These ideas are illustrated by Pilates models: their «long-lean,» well-toned legs reveal the alluring ideal—desirable, silent, and untouchable.

For many, the bodily shaping of ballet begins at a young age. Perfection is professionally demanded, revered by its audiences, and desired by its students. Yet compared to «normal» standards, the balletic body encourages a highly distorted sense of perfection.

In ballet, as inferred earlier, dancers must have the "... ideal 'Balanchine' body type for women, with the jobs going to tall, slender women with long necks, long legs, and short torsos."³⁹ Yet achieving this type of ideal balletic body, as many in the dance community understand, encourages *unhealthy*, restrictive eating behaviors.⁴⁰ The damaging behaviors a dancer must practice to achieve the ballerina's body are disfiguring.⁴¹ Even in the early to mid-twentieth century, the culture surrounding ballet «had produced ballet's deformed bodies.»⁴² Images of Pilates have pushed this idea of the «deformed ideal,» relabeling it as «healthy.»

Identifying the Ballerina: A New Reading of the Pilates Text

Before the widespread commercialization of Pilates, the exercise practice seemed sanctioned only for the economically privileged. However, due to its mainstream popularity, Pilates at-home manuals, DVDs, and on-line videos now provide cost-effective alternatives for the self-motivated. Self-learners look to these products to stay driven. Those new to Pilates find sanctuary in their homes rather than in the gym. Greeting the newly inspired, these manuals are littered with images of ideal white bodies and a veiled effort to motivate a longer-term commitment. A burgeoning life of health and well-being rewards their dedication. While intended to inspire, these Pilates images promote as «healthy» an unrealistic «ideal body.» For most, however, without surgical procedures or dangerous self-deprivation, this ideal is unachievable and unrealistic. This too is part of the power of Pilates.

The Pilates Method of Physical and Mental Conditioning (2005), first published in 1980 by Philip Friedman and Gail Eisen, is regarded as one of the «original» mainstream Pilates books.⁴³ While a dated publication, it continues to impact self-learners and Pilates instructors. This at-home exercise book was the first of its kind, making Pilates more accessible

to the general population. Further, the decade of its publication suggests the period of time in which the ballerina's kinesthetic presence came into the mainstream marketing of Pilates. Like most self-help books, the opening inspires the reader: «Wouldn't it be wonderful to be fit and supple, stronger without big, bulky muscles; to have good body tone and a firmer, flatter belly? And wouldn't it be wonderful to sit and stand and move gracefully, without having to think about it or work at it?»⁴⁴ Walking and sitting straighter, moving more gracefully, and obtaining firmer, sleeker muscles are the «riches» to be reaped by the committed student. If diligently practiced over time, the physical and mental goals of Pilates are unconsciously registered in the body. Yet within the book's pages, the ballerina's kinesthetic presence continues to influence the aesthetic of Pilates practice.

In a repetitive manner, Friedman and Eisen profess that Pilates "[firms] and [strengthens] your center while keeping it stretched and supple. . . . [and] is the prime physical result of practicing the method. . . what a glorious result it is! It means a trimmer waist and flatter belly; it means better posture and regal carriage. A properly developed center can mean less fatigue and a lowered incidence of back pain and injury."⁴⁵ The benefits of «better» posture equate to a noble carriage, justified through musculoskeletal protection. These goals and directives, imbued with cultural assumptions of bodily appearance and behavior, clearly value one type of bodily comportment over others. The authors' words clearly echo Joseph Pilates' earlier publications.

Nearly 20 years later, Brooke Siler's *The Pilates Body* (2000) reiterates similar goals and results from doing Pilates. Siler implies that onerous tasks of daily life, mental stresses, and physical chores impede one's ability to feel good. Appealing primarily to «female» stresses, she clarifies, inspires, and cautions the reader. An antidote for readers: Pilates «is not an arduous technique that leaves you tired and sore. Think about

all the hours you have spent exercising and letting your mind drift away from what you are doing.»⁴⁶ Her problematic leaning toward the female population is undeniable.

Siler draws attention to specific areas of the body and the processes by which students learn how to change them. She affirms that «you will begin to understand how the movements are merely tools to understanding your body. Structured around the stomach, hips, lower back, and buttocks—the center of the body, or its ‘powerhouse’—the movements of the Pilates Method are instrumental in maintaining good posture and alignment.»⁴⁷ The areas of the body she highlights are traditionally «feminized» areas. More concerning is the insinuation that woman need these exercises to understand their bodies.

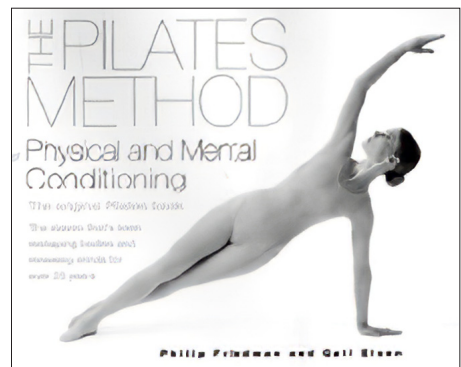
Pilates markets the overall achievement of these physical goals wholly on the will and determination of the student. This same sentiment is echoed in Helena Wulff's (2008) observations on the cultural disciplining to which participants in the ballet community subscribe. The ballerina's body, together with her ability to physically and emotionally control herself, her willpower, and her commitment, impact what she calls the «politics of performance.» Attention to the politics of performance is significant because Wulff's consideration of willpower, morality, bodily disciplining, and body type shapes the ballet body and constitutes the personality of the ballerina. As Siler (2000) assures, «There is nothing we cannot achieve if we put our minds to it, and this is especially true when we are speaking about our bodies.»⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the path to achieving these goals is often difficult. Siler leans on an individual's tenacity as the quintessential motivator. She inspires the uneasy and self-conscious reader, who may be dissuaded by the complexity of the exercises, by reaffirming that a «subconscious rhythm is inherent in us all.»⁴⁹ Learning these movements is achievable. Playing to vanity and social norms, Siler sells a student's commitment to the practice through

bodily goals: «uniformly developed muscles are the key to good posture, suppleness, and natural grace.»⁵⁰ Students learn and integrate Pilates into their everyday life as if it were a social mandate.

Questioning Health, Embracing Vanity: Ballet in the «Pilates Body»

The images of the balletic body (real and inferred) in promotional Pilates materials affect the audiences they purportedly serve. The insidiousness of these images extends deep into and beyond aesthetics. The ballerina's physicality merges with socially acceptable female emotional behaviors. The ballet dancer's appearance emphasizes her renowned kinesthetic ability, lean physicality, and emotional comportment. These qualities embody a more troubling appeal. The balletic body, due to the dancer's ability to physically excel in the practice, makes Pilates *look* «beautiful» to consumer culture, while at the same time promoting her social character. Images of Pilates reflect the ballerina's emotional character of self-discipline, control, self-denial, and emotional restraint. The ballet dancer's image contributes to a new perception of social and emotional codes surrounding the ideal and «healthy» body in Pilates.

Front cover of Pilates 1980s «how-to» book (Friedman and Eisen, 2005).



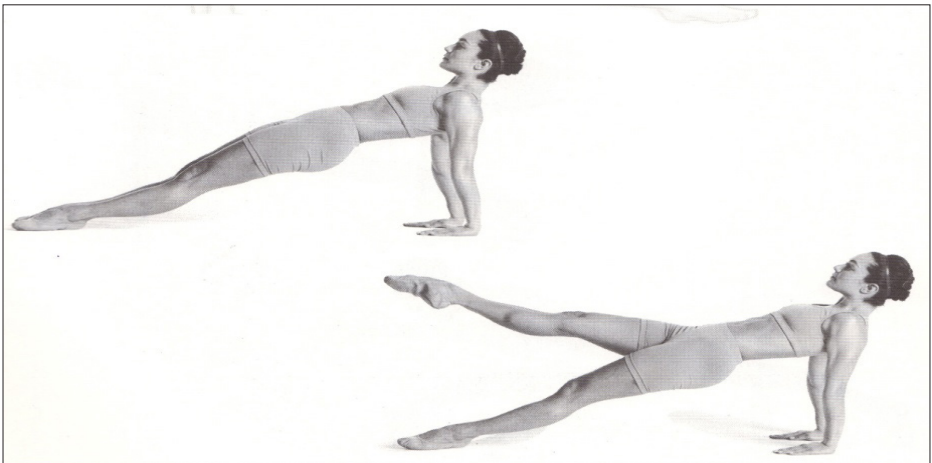
The cover image of the 1980 edition of *The Pilates Method* illustrates a white, youthful-looking woman wearing what appear to be a ballet leotard, tights, and slippers, with slender hips, smaller breasts, lean legs, smooth skin, and long hair pulled neatly back (Fig. 3). The position of her hand and arm could be interpreted as a ballet dancer's fifth position.

The Pilates Body (Siler, 2000) introduces the reader to three demonstrative bodies: «Caitlin,» «Dana,» and «Julianna.» These women reflect images of the ideal Pilates body type: long-limbed, muscularly lean, white, youthful, and «attractive.» They are not disfigured, disabled, or ugly. This type of female body is common in Pilates manuals, at-home guides, educational publications, commercial publications, and online images. Siler's identifying the women by name also highlights an imagined intimacy between the Pilates teacher and student. This pseudo-intimacy reinforces the impact of the commoditization of the Pilates body and heightens the subject/object relationship between reader and bodily text and the normalizing judgment encompassed within this relationship.⁵¹ The at-home practitioner finds solace looking up to the bodies in front of her; she imagines her own success as the ideal body on the page. The pseudo-intimacy between students and

the text of Pilates at-home manuals functions in a similar manner as the fantasy between the female audience member and the ballerina on stage. The female audience member, while watching ballet, vicariously experiences a moment when her own body is subsumed to the perfected body of the ballet dancer.⁵² The same can be said about the relationship between the textual «teacher» and student in Pilates.

Consider the image of Julianna demonstrating the «Leg Pull-Up» exercise (Fig. 4). Julianna's body is slender and well-toned; her hair is neatly pulled back away from her face; and she is wearing a two-piece exercise outfit, accentuating her torso, buttocks, and thighs. She appears to be white, small-chested, and her feet have well-developed arches, akin to the normalized physicality of a ballet dancer. Common to Pilates at-home and other marketing materials, these images personify the visual discourses in marketing practice.

In 2013, these same themes were repeated in Pilates at-home texts. According to Siler (2013), «Health and fitness go hand in hand with happiness. Nothing quite lifts your spirits like feeling fit and healthy—inside and out.»⁵³ While encouraging «Julianna» demonstrating the «Leg Pull-Up» exercise (Siler 2000).



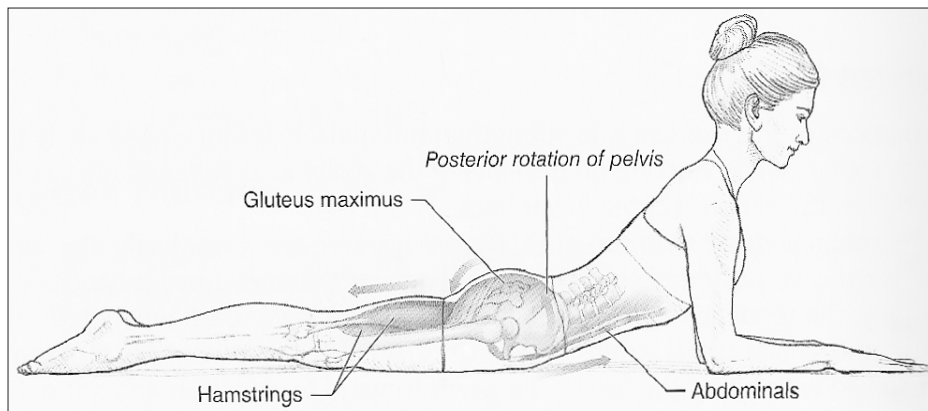


Illustration of woman demonstrating proper Pilates abdominal support (Isacowitz and Clippinger, 2011).

for the at-home practitioner, the insinuation is still alarming. Happy bodies are healthy bodies, whereas apparently «unhealthy» bodies are unhappy, derelict, and otherwise in need of rehabilitation.

Further, in today's consumer culture, many women's attention to the self-regulation of their bodies, and the duplicity of modern advertisements, perfectly position Pilates as a remedy toward an unattainable ideal. The «aesthetic of femininity» (for those who can obtain it):

mandates fragility and lack of muscular strength... women are forbidden to become large or massive; they must take up as little space as possible. The very contours a woman's body takes on as she matures—the fuller breasts and rounded hips—have become distasteful. The body which by rigorous discipline she must try to assume is the body of early adolescence, slight and unformed, a body lacking flesh or substance, a body in whose very contours the image of immaturity has been inscribed.⁵⁴

These portrayals are troubling; the socially acceptable ideal for a woman is to look like a young boy (Fig. 6). Not only do women participate in rigorous physical disciplining; in a disconcerting realization,

Naomi Wolf (2002) reports that as women advance in their professional careers, «the diet and skin care industries become the new cultural censors of women's intellectual space, and because of their pressure, the gaunt, youthful model supplanted the happy housewife as the arbiter of successful womanhood.»⁵⁵ Successful womanhood and the bodily identity associated with Pilates reaffirm this type of patriarchal ideology.

The images and goals of Pilates reinforce what Dwight Conquergood (1991) calls «patriarchal constructions that align women with the body, and men with mental faculties, [keeping] the mind-body, reason-emotion, objective-subjective, as well as masculine-feminine hierarchies stable.»⁵⁶ A woman's body and beauty, and in some cases her inferiority, become the templates on which her morality and social acceptability are projected. As is the case in Figure 5, the woman is an *illustration*, and while this is a benign reference for some, it further emphasizes her inferiority. The images and goals of Pilates perpetuate these discourses as well as this inferiority. Sandra Bartky (2006) argues that its disciplinary practices (exercises) insist that women endure taxing practices to become beautiful, which actually heightens their inferior status; «the process by which the ideal body of

femininity—and hence the feminine body-subject—is constructed ... produce[s] a ‘practiced and subjected’ body, i.e. a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed.»⁵⁷ Pilates can be situated as one of the processes whereby women subject themselves in order to become «beautiful,» thus re-inscribing their inferior status.

The ideal body is an imagined body (literally in Fig. 6). Foster (1997) suggests that a dancer’s training, which shares physiological similarities to Pilates, produces the aesthetically ideal body and the *perceived* body.⁵⁸ The perceived body is one that the dancer lives *in*, while the aesthetically ideal body eludes most. In Pilates, according to Judith Hamera (2007), there are «two inter-animating bodies created by [Pilates], ‘one, perceived and tangible; the other, aesthetically ideal’.»⁵⁹ The demonstrative body represents ideal technique in bodily form. In «best-case» scenarios, the demonstrative body is portrayed in Pilates images. The interplay between the act of learning or embodying Pilates *through* the model body (in at-home text or in studios) is significant. As Hamera (2007) states, «the [Pilates] student as object-body of technique re-conceives her own corporeal geography through the mediation of another who is, simultaneously, an ideal and another body, an interlocutor, a friend. Pilates training births and stabilizes a shared history between its interlocutors: a repertoire of movements and of stories.»⁶⁰ While not contesting Hamera’s argument, those «stories,» replayed through the instructor’s body and from which students learn, stabilize gender norms and stereotypes about women’s beauty.

Final Thoughts: Contemporary Pilates and Health?

The pendulum of fanaticism between «healthy practices» and fear of disability swings powerfully in both directions. The Pilates images might be far removed from the «health» it purports or from its «protective» benefits. «Healthy» bodies are often defined to be so

and justified through medical science. The ideals of «fitness,» «health,» and «beauty» portrayed through the Pilates images are narrow. They underscore the idea that to be «healthy» is the best possible outcome for the body, since it is the only way that happiness can be achieved. Privileging happiness, in itself, is somewhat of an American obsession. Ironically, Segal (2004) concluded that weekly Pilates training, over a six-month period, did *not* result in any significant changes to the participants’ overall health.⁶¹ They stated that «the high initial assessment of health status may show that the Pilates class attracts a relatively healthy population.»⁶² If those who participated in Pilates were already healthy, then their desire to participate in the practice stemmed from another impetus. Medical science, socioeconomic status, and the *physical* displays of privilege often overlap and take different forms over time. Years ago, Lois Banner (1983) stated, «changes in the standards of beauty is a complex issue in the interaction of class, women’s changing expectations, social modernization, medical points of view and other factors.»⁶³ The fantastic displays of women practicing Pilates are often confused with the marketing of happiness through perfect health.

Pilates complicates this veneer of «health» by using science to legitimize the need for the practice. Women who want to become «healthy» only so that they can «feel better» are, in reality, succumbing to deeply ingrained moralistic beliefs. As Alex Evans (2010) states, «worrying about weight and being held accountable for one’s girth, then became part of a wider moralistic and ideological process, firmly stitching together medicine and ‘hygiene,’ with socioeconomic self-production.»⁶⁴ Understandably, not all women «buy into» the mainstream constructions of health. However, most women participate, to some degree, in the culture of beauty either unknowingly or knowingly, since it is unavoidable and inescapable.

The «systems of power» influencing the creation and construction of white female identity do this



July 2011 issue of Pilates Style Magazine. Gathered from: <http://www.pilatesstyle.com/2011/pilates-blog/coming-next-month-our-summer-issue>



Another «ideal» Pilates boy-body? Retrieved from: <http://www.pilatesstyle.com>

through the mythical portrayal of the white female body.⁶⁵ These systems can be defined as «the network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination in a particular domain.»⁶⁶ The body is shaped and molded so that women have been led to believe that achieving *any type of body* is possible—and this is something in which Pilates clearly participates.⁶⁷ In the examples of at-home Pilates books, the ideal body can be «earned» through hard work, strong will, and dedication, perpetuating the fantasy of obtaining an ideal. Women who attempt to obtain the health and beauty standards of the feminine ideal find that it «requires such radical and extensive measures of bodily transformation that virtually every woman who gives herself to it is destined in some degree to fail.»⁶⁸

If the reader of *The Pilates Body* (2000) or the more recent *The «Women's Health» Big Book of Pilates* (2013) undertakes the project of Pilates

and fails to reach an unrealistic bodily goal, then «a measure of shame is added to a woman's sense that the body she inhabits is deficient: she ought to take better care of herself; she might after all have jogged that last mile.»⁶⁹ More alarmingly, since the standards of social acceptance of the white female body are completely unrealistic, trying to achieve those standards manifests in the «tighter control over the body,» which subsequently “[gains] a new kind of hold over the mind.”⁷⁰ Mental discipline, through the concentrated focus demanded of Pilates, coupled with an unyielding sense of bodily control, compounds the negative consequences of self-reprimand if a student fails in Pilates.

The more distressing question is, how far have we moved from these historical practices and ideologies? These commercialized images further the embodied physical ideals of Pilates and promote dated notions of white female beauty and gender norms.⁷¹ They

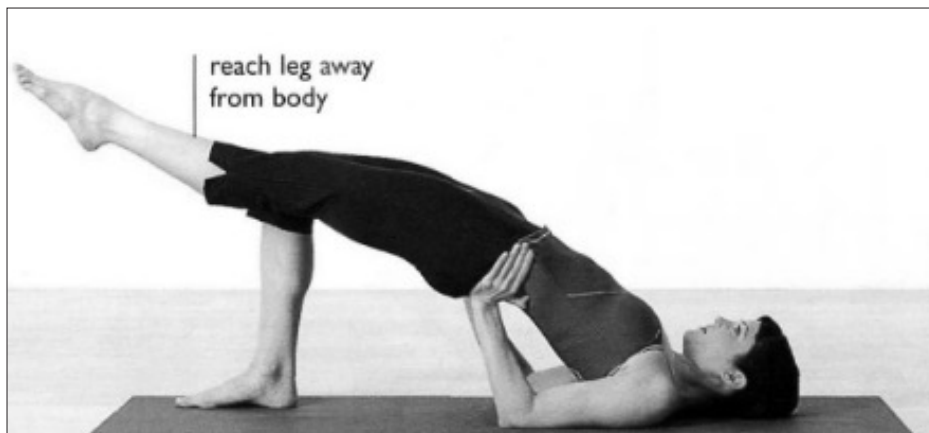


Image of an ideal body in Pilates at-home manual (Ungaro, 2013).

rely inexorably on contemporary perceptions of white beauty and the female bodily ideal (Fig. 6). The images of the ideal Pilates body, though slightly modified, continue to shape how participants should perceive themselves and what is desirable.⁷² The fear of the disabled and non-perfect body pushes many women into unrealistic and unhealthy bodily practices so that they may «successfully» construct their identities in a twenty-first century hetero-patriarchic system. In 2018, these discourses continue to evolve through Pilates' rhetoric and images.

This bodily and mental control is instantiated in its most aggressive form by Taranis and Meyer (2010), who concluded that compulsive exercising among females correlates to self-criticism and dysfunctional perfectionism.⁷³ Most women taking Pilates are already healthy and beautiful. As Siler (2013) states, «We all struggle with our bodies. As a Pilates teacher, I feel extra pressure to look 'perfect.' In fact, I don't know one model, dancer, or instructor who isn't hard on herself or hasn't had some form of body dysmorphia.»⁷⁴ This deep-seated idea frames the perception of female perfection in Pilates. Different socially constructed issues, such as unrealistic bodily expectations, are prevalent in the Pilates images.

Unsurprisingly, there are few overweight, «ugly», large-hipped, large-breasted, differently-abled, or non-

white people in the Pilates instructional photos. Pilates markets its embodied goals and the kind of body (mythical or real) that is reinforced and consumed in these popular publications. Its images and embodied goals neglect and refute ugliness and disability, while visually re-inscribing healthiness and «ideal» femininity. The images in this article reflect only a minute portion of this plethora. They perpetuate and naturalize the dominant twenty-first-century ideology of white femininity: a well-toned, slender, perfectly balanced, well-groomed body. The new reference book of female moral character was fundamentally shaped by the balletic body and contributes to the culture of beauty and bodily perfection (or culture of inadequacy) in Pilates.

In conclusion, as Joseph Pilates' work garnered attention within the U.S. dance community, it materialized as a practice for dancers and women. In this process, it became «feminized,» compounding the stereotypical heteronormative ideas of twentieth-century American white womanhood. As history suggests, the image of a «socially acceptable» and «morally pure» female body, once with fuller curves, transitioned into a thinner body with sloping shoulders, a more «beautiful» painted face, and



leaner arms and legs. Although the women in the Pilates images might be more «sexy» now (Figs. 6 and 7), with hips cocked to one side, or a stomach exposed, many are noticeably thinner, less muscular, and physically immature-looking. Many of the models in Pilates at-home manuals and educational material continue to be balletic in nature. These women are not reflections of American icons such as Rosie the Riveter or Marilyn Monroe, or even the streamlined Rockettes. Instead, they are the ideal representations of what the Pilates industry is marketing as a «healthy» Pilates body and continually pushing as the inscription of American white femininity. Traces of the balletic body have impacted the images, perception, and social acceptance of Pilates today, replacing its controversial racist and masculine past with an even more troubling expression of silent femininity.

The proliferation of Pilates performed on concrete at a «Pilates Day» celebration. Gathered from <http://www.pilatesstyle.com/category/pilates-style-news>

Notes

- 1 This article was excerpted from my doctoral dissertation, *A Critical Dance Studies Examination of the Teaching Methodologies, Exercises, and Principles of Pilates* (2013).
- 2 Roberta Sassatelli, *Fitness Culture: Gyms and the Commercialisation of Discipline and Fun* (England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- 3 See Patricia Vertinsky "Building the Body Beautiful' in The Women's League of Health and Beauty: Yoga and Female Agency in 1930s Britain." *Rethinking History* 16, no. 4 (2012), 517–542.
- 4 Jennifer Smith Maguire's work in *Fit for Consumption: Sociology and the Business of Fitness* (2007) examines the complicated relationship between the media of fitness and the acquisition of physical capital and bodily control.

- 5 See Maguire, 2008; Sassatelli, 2010; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Frew and McGillivray, 2005.
- 6 See Crissada Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). While Heyes examines somatic practices as a way to regain personal power, I suggest that Pilates actually works toward Heyes' understanding of embodied power and its problematic normalization.
- 7 Rosemary Garland-Thomas, «Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,» *Feminist Formations* 14, no. 3 (2002): 1–32.
- 8 Delineating these terms (i.e., classical, traditional, or evolved) may continue to fractionalize the industry, since they generalize the different methods of teaching. The definitions and application of each approach exist on a continuum. Classical Pilates is the execution of exercises, as originally created by Joseph Pilates. Evolved Pilates progressed (creatively or rehabilitatively) the exercises of Joseph Pilates. In an attempt to unify the industry Bambi Abernathy (2018) announced that Pilates Style Magazine will no longer use discriminating terminology like «classical,» «traditional» or otherwise. While commendable, to homogenize the teaching approaches neglects the dynamic individualism within the practice.
- 9 While inspiration for this article grew from educational experiences with Polestar Pilates Education in 2004 and Peak Pilates Education Company in 2009, I am reluctant to draw on my personal experiences because I worry that these individual experiences overlook or escape critical and contextual evaluation.
- 10 See Isabelle Ginot, «From Shusterman's Somaesthetics to a Radical Epistemology of Somatics» (2010).
- 11 See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (2nd ed. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.)
- 12 Sean Gallagher and Romana Kryzanowska. *The Joseph H. Pilates Archive Collection: Photographs, Writings and Designs* (Philadelphia: Bainbridge Books, 2000).
- 13 Gallagher and Kryzanowska, *Archive Collection*, 2000.
- 14 Joseph Pilates. *A Pilates' Primer: The Millennium Edition: «Return to Life Through Contrology» and «Your Health»* (Ashland, OR: Presentation Dynamics, Inc., 1998–2007), 132.
- 15 See Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture 1910–1935* (1997); Laura Bossi, «The 'New Man': Degeneracy and Regeneration»; Philip Comar, «Crystal and Mud: Academic Approaches to Figurative Representations of the Body.»
- 16 See Helena Wulff, «Ethereal Expression: Paradoxes of Ballet as a Global Physical Culture.» *Ethnography* 9, no. 4 (2008): 518–35.
- 17 Peter Fiasca, *Discovering Pure Classical Pilates: Theory and Practice as Joseph Pilates Intended, the Traditional Method vs. the Lies for Sale* (Peter Fiasca, PhD), 147.
- 18 See Nancy Lee Ruyter, «The Genteel Transition: American Delsartism.» *Reformers and Visionaries: The Americanization of the Art of Dance* (Dance Horizons: New York, 1979), 17–30.
- 19 Fiasca, *Discovering Pure Classical Pilates*, 146.
- 20 Yet women pushed against these ideological norms. Images of female bodybuilders during this time, as well as Rosie the Riveter and others, suggest that not all women were like the leisure-class women discussed thus far.
- 21 Javier Pont and Esperanza Romero. *Joseph Hubertus Pilates—The Biography* (Barcelona: HakaBooks, 2013), 332.
- 22 Deborah Lessen, ed. *The PMA Pilates Certification Exam Study Guide* (Miami: Pilates Method Alliance, 2005), 16.
- 23 Much of Pilates history, as from the *Biography* (2012), has been reproduced through oral history from generation to generation.
- 24 Fiasca, *Discovering Pure Classical Pilates*, 146.
- 25 This idea, common in my discussions with Pilates instructors, had hitherto escaped critical evaluation.
- 26 Fiasca, *Discovering Pure Classical Pilates*, 147.
- 27 What visibilizes this change are the legacies of the Pilates elders, many of whom were former dancers.
- 28 Susan Foster, *Choreography & Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 227.
- 29 Elizabeth Dempster, «Women Writing the Body: Let's Watch a Little How She Dances.» In *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance*, eds. E. W. Goellner and J. Shea Murphy,

- 21–38 (Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 26.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid., 27.
- 32 Gerald Jonas, *Dancing: The Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1992), 134.
- 33 Sally Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 4.
- 34 Ibid., 46.
- 35 See Genevieve Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Expression*, 6th ed. (New York: Dance Horizons, 1977).
- 36 Arlene Croce, «Balanchine Said: What was the Source of the Choreographer's Celebrated Utterances?» *The New Yorker*, 26 January 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/01/26/balanchine-said>
- 37 Susan Foster, «The Ballerina's Phallic Point,» In *Corporealities* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1–24.
- 38 Ibid., 13.
- 39 Jennifer Dunning, «Eating Disorders Haunt Ballerinas,» *The New York Times*, July 16, 1997, accessed April 27, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/16/arts/eating-disorders-haunt-ballerinas.html>.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Deirdre Kelly, *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal, and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2014).
- 42 Foster, *Choreography and Narrative*, 261.
- 43 Pilates Anytime Production, Producer, «The Life of Eve,» 2013. Accessed November 1, 2018, <https://www.pilatesanytime.com>
- 44 Phillip Friedman and Gail Eisen, *The Pilates Method of Physical and Mental Conditioning* (New York: Warner Books, 2005), 1.
- 45 Ibid., 15.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid., 10.
- 48 Ibid., 12.
- 49 Ibid., 9.
- 50 Ibid., 18.
- 51 See Cressida Heyes, «Two Kinds of Awareness: Foucault, the Will, and Freedom in Somatic Practice.» *Human Studies* 41, no. 2 (2018).
- 52 Dempster, «Women Writing the Body,» 33.
- 53 Brooke Siler, *The «Women's Health» Big Book of Pilates: The Essential Guide to Total-Body Fitness* (New York: Rodale, 2013), 374.
- 54 Sandra Lee Bartky, «Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power.» *Theorizing Feminisms*. Edited by Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger (Oxford University Press: New York, 2006), 277–92, 284.
- 55 Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (Reprint. New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 16.
- 56 Dwight Conquergood, «Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,» *Communications Monographs* 58, no. 2 (1991): 179–94, 180.
- 57 Sandra Bartky, «Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power.» In *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. Edited by E. Hackett and S. Haslanger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 283.
- 58 Susan Foster, «Dancing Bodies,» in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Edited by J. Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 237.
- 59 Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 20.
- 60 Ibid., 31.
- 61 Neil Segal, Jane Hein, and Jeffery R. Basford. «The Effects of Pilates Training on Flexibility and Body Composition: An Observational Study,» *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* 85 (2004): 1977–1981.
- 62 Segal, «The Effects of Pilates Training on Flexibility and Body Composition,» 1980.
- 63 Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 5.
- 64 Alex Evans, «Greedy Bastards: Fat Kids, Class War, and the Ideology of Classlessness,» In *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture*, eds. E. Levy-Navarro (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 155.
- 65 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Cul-*

ture and the Body. Tenth Anniversary Edition (Reprint. Berkley: University of California Press, 2003), 167.

66 Ibid.

67 Bartky, «Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power», 277.

68 Ibid., 283.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid., 289.

71 See Amy Taylor Alpers, Rachel Taylor Segel, and Lorna Gentry, *The Everything Pilates Book: The Ultimate Guide to Making Your Body Stronger, Leaner, and Healthier* (2002). A startling photo of a very young, cute, white child with a blonde pony-tail, performs the «Open Leg Rocker» exercise. This youthful indoctrination is troubling.

72 See Isacowitz, 2011; Siler, 2013; Ungaro, 2013.

73 Lorin Taranis and Caroline Meyer, «Perfectionism and Compulsive Exercise Among Female Exercisers: High Personal Standards or Self-Criticism?» *Personality and Individual Differences*, 49 (2010), 3–7.

74 Siler, *The «Women's Health» Book*, 72.

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BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Holmes teaches modern dance, dance history, dance kinesiology and somatic practice as an Assistant Professor of Dance at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia. This article grew from her life experiences and out of her doctoral research completed in March of 2013, at the University of California, Riverside. For the past three years she recovered and preserved the stories of the “elder” teachers of Pilates, in a forthcoming publication, *The Pilates Effect. Pilates’*

intersection with dancers’ socio-cultural and kinesthetic histories ultimately changed how the work was perceived, understood, taught, and demonstrated. Her future research examines the kinesthetic embodiment of race in movement forms like Pilates and somatic practices. She holds an M.A. Dance, Mills College, and a B.A. Economics, Scripps College.

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