

The Pilates Pelvis: Racial Implications of the Immobile Hips

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Like many dancers, I came to know the benefits of the exercise system commonly known as “Pilates” because of an injury I sustained while dancing.¹ Although physical therapists treated me for acute hip and lower back injuries, my body required strength and conditioning beyond what physical therapy could offer; therefore I sought Pilates to aid my recovery. During this process, the Pilates classes introduced me to a bodily education I had not yet experienced in my dancing career. I learned about varying degrees of internal and external rotation, neutral pelvis, core strength, and resistance training, which offered a valuable bodily knowledge. After months of working to re-strengthen, stabilize, and re-educate my body’s habits, I improved my spinal health and increased the functionality of my hip. That was nearly thirteen years ago, and, since then, I have been certified by three Pilates organizations, and continue to practice and teach Pilates on a regular basis.² Early in my Pilates education, I was interested in its rehabilitative benefits; I shadowed physical therapists, enrolled in anatomy and physiology courses, studied dance kinesiology, and became determined to understand the moving body from a kinesiological and biomechanical perspective. My interest in Pilates focused on the science of the moving body and how Pilates could assist in postural health.

The physical benefits of Pilates, as well as the pleasure that people experience doing Pilates, are clear to those who teach and practice the form.³ For example, students gain awareness of their movements, posture, and muscular imbalances or deficiencies; improve balance and flexibility; feel refreshed and regenerated after practice; and become more aware of their overall physical health. Over the past fifteen to twenty years, Pilates has garnered substantial attention within scientific, biomechanical, and kinesiological research.⁴ While scientifically oriented studies utilize biomechanical movement analysis to reflect the rehabilitative benefits of Pilates, I suggest that there are other intellectual lenses and theoretical apparatuses to understand and interpret the bodily effects of Pilates exercises. Pilates-based studies tend to overlook its construction as a socially constituted and historically specific movement culture. At present, the lack of attention to race in Pilates-based studies serves to normalize, mask, and perpetuate how Pilates is socially and *racially* coded. This deficiency in Pilates research thus far preserves its legacy as a universal movement system and works to

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depoliticize the form. I therefore examine Pilates, through the lens of race, to expose what *is not normally* articulated in Pilates pedagogy. The Pilates community and dance studies benefit from recovering race in Pilates, since it illuminates how embodied behaviors of certain races are normalized and privileged over others. By examining how particular movements of the body are *internalized*, kinesthetic methods of understanding race expose the culturally situated values in Pilates and push against its veneer of neutrality.

In this article, I explore how the teaching practices of the hips, spine, and core, as commonly explained in Pilates educational manuals, reinforce behaviors of a “noble-class” and racially “white” aesthetic. Central to my study is the troubling notion of white racial superiority and, specifically, the colonizing, prejudicial, and denigrating mentality found in the primacy of whiteness and its embodied behaviors. Although “white” is a theoretically loaded term and far from an innocent cultural construct, I seek to illuminate how perceived kinesthetic understandings of race in the body may be normalized. To assist me, I employ Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s seminal works, *The Black Dancing Body* (2003) and *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance* (1998), and I examine how dance forms like ballet are sets of bodily knowledges for understanding the racialization of Pilates.

I realize the potential danger of suggesting that certain movements of the pelvis, in particular Pilates exercises, represent “white” ways of moving, since doing so reduces, simplifies, and stereotypes the racial and cultural embodiments of white people and people of color.⁵ Whiteness studies pioneer and scholar Ruth Frankenberg states, “To call Americans of European descent ‘white’ in any celebratory fashion is almost inevitably, in the present political moment, a white supremacist act, an act of backlash. In fact, only when white activists and cultural workers name themselves racially in the context of anti-racist work does naming oneself as ‘white’ begin to have a different kind of meaning” (1993, 232). My intension is to make visible Pilates’ potentially problematic embodied racial discourses. The stillness of the pelvis, and the racial implications surrounding its lack of movement, are just as important in understanding the embodiment of racial stereotypes. I therefore illustrate how Pilates deliberately trains the pelvis into stillness by examining the movements, teaching practice, and rhetoric surrounding the pelvis in two exercises: “Single-Leg Stretch” and “Leg Circles with Loops” (Leg Circles). These exercises train the body in a deliberate and specific way, and teach the pelvis to conceal, restrict, and control movements that perpetuate behaviors normalized as “white.” I seek to understand how “Europeanist” behaviors, as described by Brenda Dixon Gottschild, which are also behavioral characteristics commonly found in Pilates, resist the movement and language of the hips and butt, and replace them with the vertical spine and a fanaticism with the core. By using how scholars have drawn out racial stereotypes regarding the movement of the hips as taboo, I situate the behavior of “white” hips as mute and restricted (Beltrán 2002; Borelli 2009; Figueroa 2003; Gottschild 2003).

I argue that Pilates works to distance the behaviors of the “white body” from racially marginalized bodies. Through the act of restricting the movement of the hips, Pilates racially marks the body as white and creates, through the universalized and normalized aspect of it, an invisible racialized kinesthetic knowledge, or in this case, the performance of the superiority of whiteness.⁶ Dance scholar Susan Foster, in her discussion of the history of the embodiments of empathy, choreography, and kinesthesia, states, “Corporeality helped to determine how colonization would undertake to examine the unknown and foreign, and how the body could be cultivated so as to assume a relationship of power over another body” (2011, 175). With this in mind, I suggest that Pilates “colonizes” a body by training the behaviors of bodies that are already privileged to practice its exercises, and these exercises reaffirm the same historically constructed behaviors accepted by dominant cultures.

This article unfolds in five sections. In the first section, I examine Joseph Pilates’s biography as presented in Pilates educational manuals. I do so to contextualize the creator with the development of

the practice, and illustrate how little is known about his history. The second section examines how the pelvis has been stereotyped as a racialized site in the body. Next, I examine the performance and teaching methodology of two Pilates exercises. The fourth section complicates how these exercises, when put in conversation with racialized understandings of the pelvis, illustrate how the lack of mobility in the pelvis marks it as a white kinesthetic embodiment. This racialized kinesthetic embodiment, unregistered up to this point, contributes to the normalized and internalized performances of whiteness. In the final section, I discuss the troubling issues surrounding how Pilates works to reaffirm constructions of racially constituted bodily movements.

The Social and Historical Framework Surrounding Joseph Pilates

Joseph Pilates's life and the development of the practice is a decontextualized history: the cultural, political, social, and economic factors that surrounded Joseph Pilates's upbringing tend not to be scrutinized (Friedman and Eisen 1980; Isacowitz and Clippinger 2011; Lesson 2005; Peak Pilates 2009; Polestar Pilates 2002a; Siler 2000). Commonly, the historical facets of his life pass from the memories of one generation of teachers to the next through oral history.⁷ I am not denying the validity and importance of oral history; rather I am concerned with the recounting of Joseph Pilates's life. The retelling of memories is a dynamic and subjective process, and affects the stability of the history of Pilates as it is known today.⁸

The recognized events of Pilates's life suggest that he was born around 1880 or 1883 in Germany.⁹ He was often sick as a child, and suffered from asthma, rickets, and rheumatic fever. Apparently, he overcame his physical limitations with bodybuilding and healthy lifestyle choices, and eventually became a model for anatomical drawings at the age of 14. Reportedly, he played sports, including skiing, diving, and gymnastics. Around 1912, Joseph Pilates traveled to England and worked as a "self-defense" instructor for Scotland Yard. When World War I began, he was interned as an "enemy alien" with other German nationals on the Isle of Mann, England. Once released from the internment camp, he returned to Germany and asked to teach his fitness system to the German army. Joseph Pilates also worked with Rudolf Van Laban and Mary Wigman during his time in Germany. Around 1923–1925 he immigrated to the United States, and during the passage, he met his future wife Clara. Joseph and Clara opened a fitness studio in New York and were married. Last, once in the U.S., Joseph Pilates and his work became well known and practiced in the American dance community. Although these reported insights highlight the milestones of Joseph Pilates's life, the social, political, economic, or religious contexts surrounding these events are neglected in the oral history. Additionally, while these events act as a framework to understand the cultural underpinnings of Pilates, when examined more thoroughly, richly inform the exercise practice.¹⁰

I suggest that, while Pilates emerged from ideas surrounding German masculine corporeality in the 1890s, and up until the First World War, the aesthetic and intention of the practice significantly changed with the integration of the ballet dancer's corporeality. The practice's emphasis shifted from performances and displays of masculinity to an emphasis on the lifted carriage, vertical spine, flowing movement, and the aesthetic of elongated and slender musculature. Literature examining multiple perspectives surrounding corporeality in Germany between 1874 and 1940 shows how the physically fit Anglo-Saxon male body, through acts of physical culture, manufactured a morally and socially superior political and social body (Bossi 2008; Comar 2008; Dutton 1995; Redfield-Dreisbach 2010a; Toepfer 1997). As Pilates instructor and researcher Stacy Redfield Dreisbach (2010a) suggests, Joseph Pilates came of age in this environment. Additionally, pictorial representations of the body, theories surrounding Artistic Morphology, and the development of the Workers' Gymnastics League (*Arbeitertumberburul*) and the German Gymnasts' Association (*Deutsche Turnerschaft*), as well as Swedish and German systems of body-building, personal hygiene, and "Lamarckism" (eugenic science), contributed to the ideals surrounding the male

Anglo-Saxon German body. This ideal male body exhibited broad shoulders, was muscularly well-defined, touted an elongated and lifted torso, and carried himself with straight, muscular legs. He was a man Joseph Pilates modeled himself after.¹¹ Further, while his affiliation with a specific German gymnastic league is unknown, Joseph Pilates's father reportedly owned a gymnasium and as a young child was exposed to these corporeal influences.¹² Dance scholar Lenna Rouhiainen argues too that during this time, "[German physical fitness] was tied to the ideals of a new national identity of the modern individual," and positions Joseph Pilates as one who was shaped by this climate and upheld its beliefs (2006, 126). The effects of the work, and the physical manifestation of these beliefs, are visible in photographs of Pilates's male clients (circa 1930s and 1940s) from Sean Gallagher and Romana Kryzanowska's *The Joseph H. Pilates Archive Collection: Photographs, Writings and Designs* (2000). The "before and after" photos evidence the work's effects, as previously knock-kneed, forward-shouldered, and de-conditioned male clients transformed into broad shouldered, muscularly defined, and tall standing specimens.

Once the American Dance community recognized Pilates's system of exercise, its popularity in New York City widened. As more ballet and modern dancers became involved with Pilates, the form changed to accommodate the dancer's needs through less emphasis on upper body strength, and increased focus on stretching, "toning," and the aesthetic of muscular length. Additionally, dancers' involvement impacted the perception of what this work could actually do to the body (Photo 1). Due to the physical and aesthetic demands of dance technique, ballet and modern dancers appear longer and leaner, even in the 1940s and 1950s, and I suggest this body type etched its way into the Pilates reputation. Yet Joseph Pilates's clients also included "people in New York City's high society, such as members of the Gimbel and Guggenhiem families; along with movie stars Vivien Leigh, Sir Lawrence Olivier and Katherine Hepburn and others" (Lesson 2005, 16). As the American dance community, social elite, and actors discovered Joseph Pilates's practice, the images in Gallagher's archival collection begin to shift. An article from the *Daily News*, August 4, 1960, also in the archival collection, presents photos of female dancers practicing Pilates at "Kounovsky's Gym" in New York. Toward the end of the collection, the photographs of women

Photo 1. Author demonstrating "Plank" or "Long Stretch" on reformer.



practicing “Contrology” become more prevalent, and head shots of Hanya Holm and Natalia Makarova, as well as photographs of Joseph Pilates teaching female dancers at the *Jacob’s Pillow* festival, all indicate the growing inclusion of female dancers in the practice.¹³ As “Contrology” became widely recognized due to its famous and affluent white clientele, so too did the bodily posturing they emulated. While these clients touted Joseph Pilates’s purported values, postural health, a supple and upright spine, broad, open shoulders, straight legs, and a strong center, the “dancerly” bodies impacted the public perception and eventual marketing of the work. From a contemporary vantage point, the demonstrative white and balletic looking bodies in Brook Siler’s *The Pilates Body* (2000) appear firmly rooted in Pilates’ commercialized legacy. To this day, the Pilates educational manuals continue to present the white Pilates (and balletic) female body as universal, and neglect that the practice and its values surrounding corporeality are particular to a set of historical circumstances and cultural beliefs.

The more recent mass commercialization of Pilates in the U.S. dramatically increased the number of bodies participating in Pilates. According to the “IM = X Pilates Studio Franchise” brochure, in 2005 “participation in [Pilates] was 10.2 million people up from 2.4 million in 2001 representing over a 300% increase in participation” (IM = X Pilates, Inc. n.d., 3).¹⁴ Additionally, reporter Sarah E. Needleman states, “Revenue for this niche is expected to increase over the next five years in the U.S. by an average annual rate of 5.0% to \$8.3 billion” (2011). The multibillion-dollar industry of Pilates, and the outgrowth of ancillary businesses (Pilates clothing, DVDs, pilates equipment manufacturers, pilates certification and education companies), suggests its permanence as a domestic and internationally recognized exercise modality. Its prevalence therefore creates a critical need to examine Pilates’ physical effects in the body from a racial perspective.

The Pelvis as a Racialized Location in the Body

In this section, I show how the pelvis engenders racial stereotypes and ill-founded cultural taboos. I examine how dance forms, like ballet, are visually recognizable and aesthetically and anatomically organized by the vertical spine and upright torso (Gottschild 1998; Malnig 2001). Movements of the pelvis are not primary points of departure in describing Europeanist-based movement forms. With respect to Pilates, the spine and core are commonly privileged in Pilates educational manuals. The pelvis is implicitly present, but not explicitly addressed. In the Pilates pedagogy, *if* the hips are described in the analysis, it is only in reference to the vertically aligned spine, and viewed as a “base of support” for the spine in each exercise.¹⁵ Even the term “base of support” further *subjugates* the pelvis to the spine and discussed in *reference* to the spine. The implicit understanding of the pelvis makes greater sense when social attitudes regarding the pelvis, and its movement, are considered. As I will demonstrate, the movements of the hips/butt/pelvis have been traditionally and problematically stereotyped as racialized behaviors of the “Other.” I propose the un-accentuated pelvis, commonly associated with “white,” or Anglo-American or Anglo-European aesthetics, marks Pilates in a racially specific way.¹⁶

The embodiment of whiteness has represented both perceived and realized moral and social capital and power (Dyer 1997; Wheeler 2000). Ruth Frankenberg states, “Whiteness refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination” (1993, 6). I suggest, quite literally, the location of domination is kinesthetically represented in the movement of the pelvis. The embodiment of whiteness and its social privilege and power are inextricably linked. Whiteness, and the power that has come to be associated with it, is rooted in colonization, religion, and the body (Dyer 1997; Gottschild 1998). Film and cultural studies scholar, Richard Dyer (1997) states:

Above all, the white spirit could both matter and transcend the white body, while the non-white soul was a prey to the promptings and fallibilities of the body. A hard,

lean body, a dieted or trained one, and upright, shoulders back, unrelaxed posture, tight rather than loose movement, tidiness in domestic arrangement and eating manners . . . all of these are the ways the white body and its handling display the fact of the spirit within. (23–4)

As Dyer suggests, the white person's physical embodiment, as indicated by an upright spine, controlled movement, and behavioral etiquette, reflected purity of body. Historical, religious, and political ideologies stabilized whiteness and its corresponding physicality as a "superior" race (Dyer 1997; Wheeler 2000). The upright spine and un-accentuated pelvis carried a perceived social power. Writer, poet, and literary critic, Gerald Jonas observes that, in dancing the minuet, "it was important to maintain a 'noble carriage,' to keep the torso upright as a still center of gravity while movement of the head, forearms, wrists, fingers, legs, and feet flowed into each other without awkward breaks" (1992, 80). The controlled flow of the body and the upright spine were physical components of socially acceptable dancing as well as a display of power.

I turn to the well-established and seminal work of dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild in *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (1998), since she adds a critical lens to the movements of the *balletic* body. Gottschild examines the significance of the vertically aligned spine and its metaphorical relationship to the European monarchy. She states:

In traditional European dance aesthetics, the torso must be held up-right for correct, classic form; the erect spine is the center—the hierarchical ruler—from which all movement is generated. It functions as a single unit. The straight, uninflected torso indicates elegance or royalty and acts as the absolute monarch, dominating the dancing body. (Gotschild 1998, 8)

In classical ballet, movements typically emanate outward, from proximal to distal points or from the center of the body to the limbs. The Pilates exercises "Single Leg Stretch" and "Leg Circles" embody similar movement patterns. I suggest that Gottschild's categorization of Europeanist aesthetics, described as an elongated spine, un-accentuated hips, and arms and legs extending outwardly from the center, are also embodied and visibilized in Pilates. The pelvis/sacrum forms a major component of the axial skeleton (the vertebral column, skull, and ribcage), yet the movement of the pelvis is notably absent, or diminished, in rhetoric describing the development of the Pilates practice and its history.

If pelvic movement, and its description, are lacking or absent from Europeanist aesthetics, then what does its movement infer? Racial and ethnic studies scholars have recovered negative racial stereotypes surrounding the movement of the African and Latino hips. As Gottschild states, the pelvis acts as a site where the "dominant culture projects its collective fantasies" (1998, 9). The Europeanist categorization of the Africanist dancing body's movement is "vulgar, comic, uncontrolled, undisciplined, and most of all, promiscuous" (Gotschild 1998, 9). The Europeanist aesthetic denigrates movements of the hips, which implies that the converse, stable or stationary hips, is preferable. The hips become an important component of understanding the embodiments of racial stereotypes, but also of revealing how these stereotypes are related to issues of power and domination of one body type over another. I turn to critical race studies scholar Mary C. Beltrán's argument that the deliberate performance of the Other can be successful. Her argument infers that part of the ideology surrounding the Other is the movement, shape, and size of the hips. She states:

With respect to bodily ideals in particular, . . . the contemporary system of body image in the U.S., perpetuated through the mass media, and particularly the star system, as encouraging women to achieve the slender body at all costs, equating such a body with the qualities of discipline, self-control, and success. . . fat, or even curves,

are associated with powerlessness, both actual and perceived, and lack of self-control. (Beltrán 2002, 82)

Hence discipline and control are normative qualities and bodily characteristics associated with success, while the converse is not. These ideas, when put in conversation with Pilates, illustrate how Pilates emulates the Europeanist aesthetic and reinforces these “bodily ideals” in the practice.

Thus far, I have established that Europeanist behavior privileges the verticality of the torso and restraint in the hips, and accentuates movements of the arms, legs, and feet. In the Pilates exercises, movements of the limbs and torso become noticeably marked and privileged, while the pelvis becomes increasingly controlled. The physical control and stabilization of the pelvis is visibilized in two exercises, “Single Leg Stretch” and “Leg Circles.”

Isolating Pilates

There are over 200 Pilates exercises, and each one promotes an aspect of healing, restoring, balancing, stretching, or strengthening in the body. While this article only examines two such exercises, they are foundational to the overall practice, and their concepts repeat and reiterate throughout the entire system of Pilates. I analyze the “Single Leg Stretch,” and “Leg Circle with Loops” (Leg Circles) to highlight exercises that purposely train the body to stabilize the pelvis. In this analysis, I employ the Peak Pilates and Polestar Pilates teaching approaches to illustrate two perspectives in current pedagogy. Both methods emphasize how movements of the pelvis and spine are reiterated, even though their respective sets of Pilates “principles” are distinctly different.¹⁷

Single Leg Stretch/One-Leg Stretch

In “Single Leg Stretch” (Photo 2), the two central principles of movement according to Polestar Pilates are “Core Control/Axial Elongation” and “Movement Integration” (Polestar Pilates 2002d, 24).¹⁸ According to both Polestar and Peak Pilates, to facilitate the “correct” movement patterning in the body, instructors can use verbal prompts such as “draw abdominals in, up, and wide” or “keep the pelvis still.” The excerpts from the *Polestar Pilates S-3 Education Manual* describe verbal directives that emphasize “axial elongation” (lengthening of the spine), “hip disassociation” (allowing the hips to stay still while the legs move independently or vice versa), and “low extremity alignment” (ensuring “proper” alignment of the legs) (2002d, 24).¹⁹ Polestar Pilates encourages instructors to watch students for biomechanical “errors” such as “rocking of pelvis and torso” (2002d, 24). In this case, hip disassociation is an *intended* and desired consequence of pelvic stabilization. Peak Pilates states that the exercise’s goal is to strengthen and build endurance in the

Photo 2. Author demonstrating “Single Leg Stretch.”



abdominals as well as promote alignment and centering in the body (2009, 10–11). Peak Pilates also encourages instructors to watch that the student’s legs move out and in on the same diagonal plane (no bicycling motion), the body does not move from side to side, and that the student maintains her sacrum on the mat (2009, 10–11). This method states the sign of student progression as “the ability to stabilize the pelvis and torso during independent leg movement” (2009, 10–11). Both Peak Pilates’ and Polestar Pilates’ descriptions focus on the stabilization of the pelvis and “core” needed to “properly” move the legs in a precise, efficient, and smooth manner. While Peak Pilates emphasizes the abdominals and core, Polestar Pilates attends to and emphasizes the neurological by-product of pelvic stabilization (that is, “hip disassociation” and lower-body alignment), and both methods remedy the pelvis indirectly.

Neither Peak Pilates nor Polestar Pilates gives specific instructions on the actual physical placement of the pelvis in this exercise in their descriptions. From my training experience, the implied position of the pelvis is generally thought to be in either a “neutral pelvis” or a posterior pelvic tilt, meaning that, lying supine, the pelvis tips towards the person’s navel. This action works to elongate the lumbar curve, and is accomplished by “scooping” or “drawing in” the abdominals. Polestar Pilates states that the body should be in the supine position in this exercise, but does not indicate the position of the pelvis (2002d, 24). Similarly, with the exception of “sacrum on the mat,” Peak Pilates recommends to “lie on your back . . . and keep your lower back on the Mat” (2009, 10).²⁰ While description of the pelvis is absent from these scenarios (although it is inferred), both manuals maintain that control and stability of the pelvis is important to perform it “correctly.” If the embodiment of whiteness, and rhetoric surrounding the behavior of whiteness, denies or negates movement of the pelvis, and instead accentuates the verticality of the spine, then the Pilates exercise of “Single Leg Stretch” fosters this behavior. Further, this exercise promotes a racialized configuration of the body through its aesthetic values, anatomical principles, and pedagogical practice. Yet, all the while, it invisibilizes its preference toward whiteness by never mentioning race and privileging scientific discourse.

Leg Series with Loops (Leg Circles)

Like “Single Leg Stretch,” the use of breath, correct technical performance, and employment of the Pilates movement principles influence the physical effects of the “Leg Circle” exercise. The most important Pilates principles of movement in this exercise, from the perspective of the *Polestar Pilates Education S-1 Manual*, are “Core Control/Axial Elongation” and “Lower Body Alignment” (2002c, 22). Along these same lines, Peak Pilates suggests the movement goal of the exercise is to challenge the core by learning how to isolate movement of the legs from the pelvis. Additionally, Peak Pilates explains that this exercise “challenge[s] the powerhouse. [It also] improves symmetrical alignment of legs, [and] lengthens and tones the legs and buttocks while lubricating the hip joints” (2009, 12–13). To perform this exercise “correctly,” a student lies on the “Reformer’s” moving carriage, places her feet in the “Footstraps,” and while maintaining a still pelvis, mindfully draws imaginary ovals or “circles” in space with the legs (Photo 3).²¹ An instructor verbally facilitates this exercise through phrases such as “move the legs from your powerhouse” or “lengthen and strengthen the legs out away from your core.” Imagery cues for this exercise include phrases like “anchor the hips to the carriage,” or “paint the sky with your toes.” The Polestar Pilates instruction manual outlines the exercise performance and instructor directives as “maintain spine and pelvis in neutral throughout the movement,” and suggests instructors’ cues for “axial elongation of trunk and extremity,” “hip disassociation,” or “neutral pelvic position” (2002c, 22). Additionally, Polestar instructors are trained to watch for “tilting pelvis at end of range” since this tilting indicates moving beyond a student’s point of control (2002c, 22).²² According to Peak Pilates, a sign of student progress is “the ability to isolate leg movement from the pelvis and to maintain pelvic stability with distal challenge from legs” (2009, 12–13). In both scenarios, pelvic control and stillness illustrate the proper execution of the exercise.



Photo 3. Author demonstrating “Leg Circles.”

Similar to “Single Leg Stretch,” both pedagogical perspectives limit or infer the pelvis’s position. Peak Pilates states that the “lower back [should be] anchored into the Mat” (2009, 12), invisibilizing the pelvis, and *Polestar Pilates Education S-1 Manual* recommends that clients maintain a “neutral pelvic position” (2002c, 22), thus reinforcing its normative still position. While Peak Pilates suggests that the pelvis is in a posterior pelvic position, and Polestar Pilates promotes the natural curvature of the lumbar spine, both companies *do* emphasize the isolation or “dissociation” of lower limbs from the core and stillness of the pelvis.

In summary, examining the individual body areas, such as the hips and spine, from a biomechanical and kinesiological perspective can be beneficial to a new instructor’s understanding of the Pilates exercises, specifically with respect to how the exercises can potentially balance, restore, and heal the body. Yet the biomechanical perspective and the concepts iterated in these exercise neglect the racial aspects of how these exercises inform the body. The embodiment of Pilates, as seen in the torso’s muscular facilitation of axial elongation or spinal lengthening, pelvic stabilization, and the deliberate training of the body, further inscribes the previously noted Europeanist aesthetic values. The idea that the pelvis can be “neutral” and “controlled,” and that these are both “correct” in position and performance, are components of a Eurocentric embodied vision that masks the racial hegemony at work.

Complicating Pilates

Part of the troubling power of whiteness is its ability to be visible and simultaneously invisible (Dyer 1997). Whiteness and power are inextricably linked, and the appearance and construction of the corporeal reinforces what is or is not considered a legitimate social body. The behavioral characteristics of whiteness are normalized and privileged, while bodily behaviors outside the “norm” are condemned. I take issue with Pilates in that it problematically *masks* this normalizing process. Educational manuals emphasize that spinal elongation and core strength are biomechanically necessary for the health of the spine, and while I do not disagree, it overlooks how this training could be racialized. These ideas are deeply rooted in its discourse; Pilates asserts the kinesiological and

biomechanical importance of the core through its written manuals and teaching methodologies, thereby justifying the erasure of other movements. The moving, circumducting, swaying, or swirling the pelvis, as previously discussed through the Latina and African hips, marks movements of the racial “Other.” Consequently, Pilates normalizes a kinesthetic understanding of whiteness within its practice. While “Single Leg Stretch” and “Leg Circles” can be understood in terms of lengthening, toning, balance, and symmetry, they can also be evaluated for the ways the muscles are specifically conditioned to accentuate the development of the core, and conceal the action and development of the hips. These two Pilates exercises consciously create an invisible and unregistered embodied racialized kinesthetic knowledge: in this case, the *unconscious* embodiments of whiteness.

Earlier I mention that the clients with whom Joseph Pilates commonly worked in his New York studio were ballet dancers, actors, and wealthy New Yorkers. In my conversations with Pilates educators and practitioners, I learned that Joseph Pilates’s earnings as a studio owner were humble. His studio welcomed paying clientele during a time of extreme U.S. economic hardship. However, at the start of the twenty-first century’s “Great Recession,” and in my experiences as a Pilates instructor in Santa Monica, California, it was common to work with affluent clients in studios located in or around their affluent neighborhoods.²³ The majority of my clients at that time were white, middle-aged women or men, or younger affluent white women. The photographs in this article represent the “ideal” form and body (according to the manuals), as well as a reflection of the population I serve (Photo 4).

As previously inferred, the behaviors of the white body, and its parts, can be broken down and analyzed through the practices it participates in, just as much as African or Latino bodies. Gottschild’s seminal work, *The Black Dancing Body* (2003), methodologically dissects the black body and, in conjunction with the racial stereotypes and legacies of slavery, illustrates how the African American body was colonized, dissected, and mapped by its stereotypes. Instead of being understood and viewed as one working human unit, Gottschild’s analysis illustrates how the racial stereotypes break down the African American body into parts: skin, butt, hair, and feet. Not only does the African American body and its parts carry stigma, but as Gottschild suggests, movements of these parts have also been racialized. With respect to movements of the core and torso, “Polycentrism

Photo 4. Author using tactile cues to stabilize a student’s pelvis.



[more than one center moving at one time] runs counter to academic European aesthetics, where the ideal is to initiate movement from one locus—the nobly lifted, upper center of the aligned torso, well above the pelvis” (Gottschild 1998, 14). While Gottschild’s Africanist core moves fluidly as a democratic participant in the body, the Europeanist core is more structured and hierarchically organized.

The discourses commonly found in Pilates educational manuals, such as the manner in which they examine muscle groups and areas of stabilization and elongation, over-emphasize these ideas. While I am not critiquing the correctness of the biomechanical perspective, I maintain that the biomechanical perspective is not universal, and there are culturally situated concerns underlying it. The constant practice, repetition, and verbalization of the biomechanical/scientific approach instills racialized tropes in the body. For example, verbalizations such as “dissociation,” “precision,” “control,” “endurance,” and “corseted” suggest a somewhat dogmatic, almost mechanized, instruction for the body. The rhetoric that pervades much of Pilates affects the body and mind through its language. Pilates physically and linguistically infiltrates the body, regulates its movements, and justifies this practice through science and health. Pilates rhetoric dictates how the body “can” and “should” or “should not” move. The hips in Pilates are stripped of extraneous movements in order to become quiet and unthreatening. By consequence, the spine becomes elongated, and the body becomes more “regal.” These iterations, when placed in conversation with Gottschild’s African aesthetics, especially polycentrism or polyrhythm, can be racially marked as white.

Continuing, “Single Leg Stretch” and “Leg Circles” are both supine positions, or orient the body’s position to gravity so that the hip muscles are not the primary weight-bearing muscles.²⁴ In this capacity, according to Peak Pilates, the relationship between the heels, core, inner thigh, and “sitz” bones (located at the base of the pelvis) is critical in the performance and execution of these exercises. The neuromuscular connection between these areas of the body works to “oppositionally lengthen” the lower limbs towards the body’s central axis. This action, in turn, facilitates a deeper connection with movements emanating from the core. The primary stabilizers of this exercise, and those that are the most activated, stressed, or developed, are the muscles of the torso and core, and consequently de-accentuate the development of the gluteus or hip muscles. Consequently, the muscles of the hips are classified or considered as “accompanying muscles” (Isacowitz and Clippinger 2011, 82). According to Pilates educators and authors Rael Isacowitz and Karen Clippinger, “[Single] Leg Stretch is a valuable stability exercise that emphasizes the abdominals. The abdominals work in multiple roles to keep the trunk lifted, maintain contact between the lower back and the mat, and keep the abdominal wall pulled in. This abdominal action is necessary to maintain pelvic and spinal stability” (2011, 83). The emphasis in Pilates to accentuate the muscles of the torso to work to support, elongate, and protect the spine, and neglect movement of the pelvis, is precisely where the racial disciplinary patterning in the body begins. The privileging of the core over the pelvis suggests a reluctance to highlight the movements of the pelvis, and instead fanatically emphasizes and scientifically justifies the use of the core.

The “permissible” range of movement of the legs, in both “Single Leg Stretch” and “Leg Circles,” depends on the client’s ability to maintain a stabilized pelvis. According to the classical approach, the core’s action (or “scooping”) elongates the lumbar curve, thereby allowing it to maintain contact with the moving carriage, and stabilize the pelvis. As the legs circle, they draw away from the abdominal area, while at the same time the abdominal area draws the legs into the centerline of the body, thereby creating length and opposition in the body. As Peak Pilates suggests, the goal of this exercise is to “improve the symmetrical alignment of the legs” (2009, 12). In a supine position, the hips can strengthen, but only up to a certain point (perhaps that is why Peak Pilates uses the word “tone” to describe the buttock in this exercise). The *movement* of the legs emanating from the core, and the corresponding *stillness* of the pelvis, become more valued. The Pilates instructor’s manuals suggest the circumference of the circles is only as big as the client’s ability to keep the “pelvis still.” The behavior of the legs is regulated by the stillness of the pelvis.

The valued embodied characteristics of “Single Leg Stretch” and “Leg Circles” are breath, external rotation, correct spinal posture, strengthening the chest and back, and coordinated movement. They are also characteristics of the ideal balletic aesthetic: vertical spine, upright and lifted torso, external rotation, and elongating limbs out into space. The movement of the hips in both Pilates exercises is deliberately restricted and reinforced through verbalization cues that discourage pelvic movement.²⁵ It is as if movement of the pelvis is taboo, especially since pelvic movement (in these exercises) is deemed biomechanically *unsafe*. The obsessive attention to the core, and the stabilization of the hips, point to common “whitening” themes: pelvic control and Europeanist aesthetic values.

Where Do We Go from Here?

As a Pilates instructor, I will continue to promote and teach Pilates. I help students to balance their bodies, strengthen their cores, stand with “better” posture, and feel “stronger” in their bodies. But I have lingering concerns. Pilates instructors represent adjudicators of the body, or “body experts,” because teaching Pilates involves discerning whether bodies are imbalanced, slumping, weak in their centers, or moving without awareness. Pilates teachers work to correct these behaviors. Teachers train clients to move more efficiently and create “better” neurological patterning. Yet I worry I have hidden too long behind the shroud of promoting “health and well-being” or “injury prevention” without actually considering what the inequalities surrounding scientific discourse may actually mean. My discernments or judgments as a Pilates teacher require me to judge, shape, and discipline bodies, from “deviant” to “legitimate” subjects (Shilling 2003, 126). I cannot ignore how certain movements of the body, such as *immobile hips*, could be an *internalized* kinesthetic method of understanding of race, or otherwise “deviant” behavior. Moving forward in my practice and teaching, and perhaps what this article will reflect to others, I now recognize Pilates’ physiological importance as well as the troubling undercurrent of its racial agenda and aesthetic.

In conclusion, the teaching practices regarding the pelvis in two Pilates exercises and how they are explained in Pilates educational manuals reinforce behaviors of a racially “white” aesthetic. I maintain that this process continues to normalize and privilege certain behavioral characterizes over others. Pilates masks its preference toward “whiteness” by concealing the race within its practice, and privileging scientific discourse. Pilates is a Euro-American movement system, and continues to normalize white racial hegemony. These exercises reaffirm historically constructed behaviors accepted by dominant cultures by internalizing and normalizing problematic and stereotypical kinesthetic, racialized values within “Single Leg Stretch” and “Leg Circles.” I suggest that Pilates “colonizes” bodies that are “privileged” to practice these exercises. Dance Studies brings a critical investigation into movement practices such as Pilates by revealing how they reaffirm the problematically racialized kinesthetic norms they might promote.

Notes

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1. For the purposes of this article, “Pilates” will be written as Pilates, and denotes the exercise practice. Its creator, Joseph Pilates, will be referred to as Joseph Pilates.

2. I was certified in Polestar Pilates in 2004, Peak Pilates in 2009, and the Pilates Method Alliance in 2011.

3. The Pilates “community” encompasses an international spectrum of participants. Most of the North American Pilates educational and equipment manufacturing companies have strong

professional relationships with studios on each continent (Hagins, Adler, Cash, Daugherty, and Mitrani 1999). This article contextualizes Pilates in the twenty-first century in the United States.

4. See Anderson and Spector (2000); Loosli and Herold (1992); Self, Bagley, Triplett, and Paulos (1996); Mathias, Franca, and Bittar (2004); or Vieira (2004).

5. From my experience, teaching clients how to isolate and facilitate movement of their pelvis is first on the list of their accomplishments.

6. This is not to say that the hips or pelvis do not move in Pilates. What I am suggesting is that Pilates trains the pelvis into controlled movements. While the body learns to move fluidly through the exercises of Pilates, the pelvis is controlled and stabilized. There are no directives in Pilates that deliberately train the pelvis to move in a wild or out-of-control manner.

7. The first generation of Pilates teachers, or those people who studied with Joseph Pilates, were Carola Trier, Eve Gentry, Romana Kryzanowska, Ron Fletcher, Kathleen Stanford Grant, Bruce King, Lolita San Miguel, Jerome Andrews, Bob Seed, Nadja Cory, and Mary Bowen (Lesson 2005). These students passed on stories regarding their experiences with Joseph Pilates to their students.

8. I am thinking about the relationships between memories and history, and how in some cases, oral histories are passed on, re-created, or imagined; cf. Connerton (1989).

9. See Polestar Pilates (2002b, 21).

10. While it is beyond the scope of this article to critically evaluate the accuracy of these histories, it is important to understand that there is a lack of scholarly historiography.

11. Images of Joseph Pilates in his own work, *Pilates' Return to Life Through Contrology* (1945) and *Your Health* (1934), illustrate his fascination with ideal form (Pilates and Miller 1998).

12. In my conversations with Stacy Redfield-Dreisbach (2010a, 2010b), we discussed theories regarding the events of Joseph Pilates's life based on her research. While Ken Endelman (2011) suggests that Joseph Pilates may have migrated from town to town within Germany, Stacy suspects that Joseph Pilates's father might have owned a gymnasium, and grew up as a "gym rat" in his early life.

13. Pilates was originally called "Contrology," but its name changed over time.

14. I suggest the presence of a company that specializes in opening "turn-key" Pilates franchises indicates its growing commercial popularity.

15. The terms "neutral spine" or "imprinting" the lower spine only by inference address the position of the pelvis.

16. For the purposes of this project, and following Brenda Dixon Gottschild's ideas, movements having "Europeanist" values are those with a greater emphasis on the limbs, an erect spine, and unaccentuated pelvic movements. Since I am arguing that the absence of pelvic movement is a way to "whiten" the body, then the *movement* of the pelvis as it has been stereotypically racialized becomes significant.

17. The Peak Pilates approach is generally more "classical," while the Polestar Pilates approach is generally more "evolved." The names "classical" and "evolved" are commonly used in the Pilates industry to denote the style and type of training. Brent Anderson and Aaron Spector define the evolved approach as "practitioners who are continuing to define and expand on Pilates' work from the Classical Pilates practitioners" (2000, 399). Conversely, classical, as defined by Peter Fiasca, suggests that classical Pilates is the performance of the Pilates exercises as they were originally created and intended by Joseph Pilates (2009, 2). Polestar Pilates and Peak Pilates are situated, more or less, on a continuum, and out of all of the various teaching approaches, not one particular method is "right" or "wrong"/"better" or "worse." Peak Pilates in the *Peak Pilates System 1 Instructor's Manual* specifically highlights that the company's "intent was to create a new paradigm for Classical Pilates education that preserves the integrity while making it more accessible and user-friendly" (2009, 1). I am certified with both companies, and use them equally and often in my own work with clients.

18. To assist the reader in understanding the Polestar Pilates principle of movement of Axial Elongation, the *Polestar Pilates Education P-F Manual* maintains that "axial elongation decreases the compressive forces on the disc, and weight bearing increases the compressive force on the disc. This compression and decompression provides nutrients and health to the disc" (2002b, 26). The

Polestar Pilates Education P-F Manual also states that “axial elongation promotes an optimal environment for segmental movement and prevents compressive and shear forces that are thought to cause spinal pathologies” (2002b, 27). While I am not contesting the scientific accuracy of this idea, I suggest this reliance on scientific justification further privileges spinal lengthening as a universal and ideal bodily norm.

19. The *Polestar Pilates Scientific Foundations Manual* (2002a) defines disassociation as “the isolation of movement at a desired joint distal or proximal to the site of the lesion. Other names for disassociation are fulcruming or pivoting of a joint” (18).

20. According to the *Peak Pilates System I Instructor’s Manual*, “it is impossible to maintain [a] neutral lumbar spine when lying supine due to the relationship between the spine and gravity. An attempt to maintain neutral spine will actually ‘fire up’ the spinal extensors inhibiting the recruitments of the transverse abdominals” (2009, 14).

21. The “Reformer” is a piece of equipment that is commonly found in a Pilates studio. The moving “carriage,” or a padded platform, is the area where clients may lie down to work through various Reformer Pilates exercises. The carriage is attached to the front of the Reformer with springs. The springs attach to a mechanism called a “Spring-” or “Gear Bar.” The Gear Bar provides exercise resistance and assistance, depending on the amount of springs attached to the Gear Bar.

22. The “neutral spine” position differs from person to person. Generally speaking, the neutral spine is defined as a pelvic position where the two ASIS (anterior superior iliac spine) protuberances and the pubic bone are parallel to the ceiling in a supine position (Isacowitz and Clippinger 2011, 19). This pelvic position encourages the natural curve of the lumbar spine.

23. Lewis (2009) examines how Pilates studios fared during the 2008 recession. In my private conversations with studio owners, I learned that their business not only sustained annual gross income, but in some cases thrived (expanded into new spaces) during this time.

24. Historically speaking, the supine position developed from Joseph Pilates’s work with injured soldiers in WWI. From a contemporary perspective, the supine position aids in injury rehabilitation because of its non-weight-bearing environment.

25. A common phrase in Pilates, as mentioned in the *Polestar Pilates Education P-F Manual*, is “as much as necessary as little as possible” (2002b, 35). This encourages the idea of neurological efficiency in the body by discouraging pelvic movement.

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