

In Pursuit of Fitness: Bodywork, Temporality and Self-Improvement in Mozambique

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Sub-Saharan Africa is no longer an outlier in the global ‘fitness revolution’. In cities across the continent, a growing number of people are adopting a more active lifestyle. In Mozambique – where only a few years ago, gyms and joggers were few and far between, and not many people would have considered working out at all, let alone in public – exercising is now remarkably popular. Based on ethnographic research carried out in various fitness sites in Maputo, this article examines the new urban rhythms and temporal orientations fostered by the growing popularity of fitness in the region and extends genealogies of the self-improving subject by situating the pursuit of fitness in relation to successive colonial and post-colonial regimes that promoted various forms of body-work as part of broader ethical projects of the self. I argue that, while it might be tempting to dismiss the growing popularity of fitness as the mere encroachment of neoliberal ideals of the self-improving subject, doing so would not only gloss over significant historical continuities but risk overshadowing the ways in which the pursuit of fitness is enhancing the quality of life of many. In recognising the ethical value that these projects have for those who pursue them, the article sheds light on the appeal of fitness in a specific space–time, while moving away from what are often contemptuous assessments of this global trend. I show how, as an aspirational pursuit that operates at the intersections of health and beauty, fitness creates a particular orientation towards the future that borrows from socialist registers of discipline and struggle while, in turn, highlighting the continued relevance of such registers within contemporary imaginaries. At a time when global health priorities are shifting, ethnographic accounts like the one presented here are needed to help to complicate understandings of the articulation between health and moral imaginaries of self-improvement.

Keywords: Mozambique; fitness; post-socialism; self-improvement; middle-class aspirations; temporality; neoliberal personhood; workout ethic

Sub-Saharan Africa is no longer an outlier in the global ‘fitness revolution’.¹ In cities across the continent, a growing number of people are adopting a more active lifestyle. In Maputo, fitness enthusiasts take to the streets every morning just before sunrise to run along the city’s tree-lined avenues. A similar scene is repeated around sunset as others gather in parks and

1 J. Andreasson and T. Johansson, ‘The Fitness Revolution: Historical Transformations in the Global Gym and Fitness Culture’, *Sport Science Review*, 23, 3–4 (2014), pp. 91–112.

roundabouts to exercise in small groups. At weekends, many jog along the coastal walkway, some flaunting the latest fitness apparel while Lycra-clad cyclists zoom past on road bikes. The city also has a growing number of indoor private gyms that cater to a mixed clientele of middle-class Mozambicans and expatriates. There are also yoga and Pilates studios, as well as several CrossFit boxes, including one called *A Luta Continua*.² Only a few years ago, gyms and joggers were few and far between, and not many people would have considered working out at all, let alone in public. Exercising in Mozambique, especially in urban and suburban settings, is now remarkably popular.³

The growing popularity of fitness is, in part, the outcome of wider processes of globalisation that have facilitated the dissemination and adoption of increasingly standardised ideas and ideals about health, beauty and the perfectibility of the human body.⁴ In Mozambique, these flows tend to follow well-established regional channels of exchange with neighbouring South Africa. Since the late 19th century, Mozambican miners have returned from working in the gold and diamond mines of the Witwatersrand with new commodities, linguistic forms, ideas about religion, beauty, love and architecture, along with new diseases.⁵ There is also much sharing and borrowing between lusophone countries, especially through the Brazilian media industry and Pentecostal churches such as the highly popular Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God).⁶ Social media are another major source of fitness inspiration and information. Fitness entrepreneurs, like Angelo (see below), learn much of their trade from watching YouTube videos. Gyms and fitness centres regularly post informative and motivational content on their Facebook page and on Instagram, and so do individual fitness enthusiasts.⁷ In 2019, a group of young Mozambicans launched *Maningue Fit*, ‘the first digital fitness magazine made in Mozambique for Mozambicans’, in an effort to produce informative fitness content tailored to a growing local audience.⁸

The fitness boom across sub-Saharan Africa came at a historical moment of unprecedented economic growth. In Mozambique, people date the emergence of a mainstream fitness culture to about 2015, a time when the country was enjoying a wave of prosperity, however short lived, following the discovery of important oil and gas reserves.⁹

2 *A luta continua* (the fight goes on) was a key Frelimo slogan during Mozambique’s socialist period in the 1980s. See the CrossFit box’s Facebook page, available at <https://www.facebook.com/CF.ALutaContinua/>, retrieved 31 July 2020.

3 Since I started this project in 2017, several colleagues working in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa have reported a similar trend.

4 H. Widdows, *Perfect Me* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018); A.A. Brewis *et al.*, ‘Body Norms and Fat Stigma in Global Perspective’, *Current Anthropology*, 52, 2 (2011), pp. 269–76.

5 R. First, *Black Gold: The Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant* (Sussex, Harvester Press, 1983); A. Romão Saúte, ‘Mozambican Convert Miners: Missionaries or a Herd without a Shepherd? The Anglican Mission of Santo Agostinho, Maciene, 1885–1905’, in E. Macamo (ed.), *Negotiating Modernity. Africa’s Ambivalent Experience* (Dakar, Codesria Books, 2005), pp. 98–132; R. Thornton, *Unimagined Community: Sex, Networks, and Aids in Uganda and South Africa* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008); H. Gengenbach, ‘Boundaries of Beauty: Tattooed Secrets of Women’s History in Magude District, Southern Mozambique’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 14, 4 (2003), p. 124.

6 L. van de Kamp, *Violent Conversion: Brazilian Pentecostalism and Urban Women in Mozambique* (Rochester, Boydell and Brewer, 2016). That said, as one of my interlocutors pointed out, although Mozambicans have been exposed for many years to Brazilian telenovelas, which often feature people exercising, the uptake of exercise was far more recent.

7 Among the young Mozambicans whom I follow on social media, several almost exclusively post fitness-related content. I have also come to know about the fitness interests of some of my older acquaintances through their social media posts.

8 Interview with the founder and chief editor Fábio Dagot, Maputo, May 2019. All interviews for this article were conducted by the author. The four editions are available online at <https://www.maninguefit.co.mz/downloads>, retrieved 31 January 2021.

9 A. Brooks, ‘Was Africa Rising? Narratives of Development Success and Failure among the Mozambican Middle Class’, *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 6, 4 (2018), pp. 447–67.

The growing popularity of fitness has also coincided with an increase in sedentary lifestyles and changing diets¹⁰ and with the rise of the ‘African middle class’.¹¹ It is important to note, however, that the pursuit of fitness transcends class in ways that testify to the phenomenon’s broader appeal. Even if gym membership remains prohibitively expensive for most of the population, those with modest means who wish to exercise have embraced more affordable alternatives. In the poorer peripheral neighbourhoods of Maputo, for example, many have reappropriated public spaces as fitness sites,¹² and there are used-clothes sellers that now specialise in the sale of second-hand active wear.

The practice of physical activity in Mozambique is, of course, not new, and colonial and post-colonial histories of sport and leisure provide an important historical backdrop against which to understand current trends.¹³ That said, as a pursuit driven by a combination of health and aesthetic concerns,¹⁴ fitness departs from these earlier forms of physical activity, if not in its bodily outcomes then in the ways in which it is imagined. As a woman in her 60s put it to me in a conversation about her early morning exercise routine, ‘even though I was interested in sports and exercise from a very young age, it’s only now that I call it “fitness”’.¹⁵ The pursuit of fitness also rests on the idea that the fit body is a desirable body in a cultural setting in which fatness has more commonly been considered a marker of beauty, health and wealth.¹⁶ The growing popularity of fitness across the global south has, in fact, often been understood as indicative of the globalisation of western ideals of beauty. What my research suggests, however, is not only that such ideals are considerably varied but, even more importantly, that the fitness craze in this southern African country has not inspired a radical transformation of beauty ideals. Fat has long been seen and experienced as a complex bodily substance that is socially and aesthetically valued, depending on where it is located. And women in particular have long wanted a little less here and perhaps a little more there. The pursuit of fitness has, I argue, more to do with new forms of engagement with these ideals than with their redefinition. It would also be a mistake to see contemporary projects of fit self-making as mere expressions of neoliberal subjectification;¹⁷ in fact, they also draw on entrenched understandings of self-improvement rooted in previous regimes that have promoted various forms of body-work within broader ethical projects of the self. As Nikolas Rose writes:

[o]f course, humans at almost any place and time one cares to investigate, have tried to improve their bodily selves – using prayer, meditation, diet, spells, physical and spiritual

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- 10 J. Crush, B. Frayne and M. McLachlan, *Rapid Urbanization and the Nutrition Transition in Southern Africa*, African Food Security Urban Network No. 7 (Cape Town, AFSUN, 2011), available at <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=afsun>, retrieved 28 February 2021.
- 11 H. Melber (ed.), *The Rise of Africa’s Middle Class* (London, Zed Books, 2016).
- 12 Informal backyard gyms, which pre-date the current fitness boom, continue to be popular. A young man with a yard and an accommodating household would set up an outdoor training area with homemade equipment and would usually invite other young men from the neighbourhood to use the space. Some young people living in apartment blocks have started exercising in hallways and staircases.
- 13 N. Domingos, *Football and Colonialism: Body and Popular Culture in Urban Mozambique* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2017); T. Ranger, ‘Pugilism and Pathology: African Boxing and the Black Urban Experience in Southern Rhodesia’, in W. Baker and J. Mangan (eds), *Sport in Africa* (New York, Holmes and Meier, 1987); L. Fair, ‘Kickin’ it: Leisure, Politics and Football in Colonial Zanzibar, 1900s–1950s’, *Africa*, 67, 2 (1997), pp. 224–51; P.M. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 14 J.S. Maguire, *Fit for Consumption: Sociology and the Business of Fitness* (London, Routledge, 2007).
- 15 In Mozambican Portuguese, working out is sometimes referred to as fitness, but more commonly used expressions include *gyamar* (a verb constructed from the English word gym), *treinar* or *fazer ginástica*.
- 16 For examples from other parts of the continent, see R. Popenoe, *Feeding Desire: Fatness, Beauty and Sexuality among a Saharan People* (London, Routledge, 2012); P.J. Brink, ‘The Fattening Room among the Annang of Nigeria’, *Medical Anthropology*, 12, 1 (1989), pp. 131–43; B. Dahl, ‘“Too Fat to Be an Orphan”’: The Moral Semiotics of Food Aid in Botswana’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 29, 4 (2014), pp. 626–47.
- 17 M. Ruckenstein, and N.D. Schüll, ‘The Datafication of Health’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 46 (2017), pp. 261–78; I. Gershon *et al.*, ‘Neoliberal Agency’, *Current Anthropology*, 52, 4 (2011), pp. 537–55.

exercises, and much more to increase their health, fertility, sporting prowess, longevity, acuity, and almost everything else. And, in all these places and times, there have been experts of bodily improvement with their own potions and systems, as well as lay beliefs about life-enhancing powers of particular activities, foods, thoughts, and the like. What is new, then, is neither the will to enhancement, nor enhancement itself.¹⁸

In Mozambique, people have relied on a broad repertoire of body-work technologies, or what Foucault would call ‘technologies of the self’,¹⁹ to improve or restore health and to enhance their appearance. From daily hygiene practices such as bathing and applying oils and creams to the skin to more elaborate forms of grooming and ‘practices of bodymaking’ like tattooing and scarification,²⁰ and from the consumption of a variety of roots that can cure illnesses or even render one sexually irresistible²¹ to the use of protective charms, Mozambicans possess rich repertoires of self-enhancement. The globalisation of fitness has introduced a series of alternative forms of body-work that add to these pre-existing repertoires and have rapidly acquired local meaning and relevance.

I have been particularly intrigued by the ways in which an ‘emerging workout ethic’ in Mozambique,²² with its new urban rhythms and its (re)orientation toward ‘the near future’,²³ often explicitly borrows from socialist registers of struggle and sacrifice. If the impact of neoliberal reforms on political subjectivities is readily visible in post-socialist Mozambique,²⁴ these redefined subjectivities co-exist with enduring socialist sensibilities.²⁵ The aim of this article is not to untangle these different layers. It would, indeed, be rather difficult to clearly distinguish neoliberal ideals of the self-improving subject from socialist legacies of discipline and transformation. Instead, my aim is to attend to self-improvement as the mainstay of successive ethical regimes, while also making sense of the growing popularity of fitness in Mozambique. Based on continuing ethnographic field research that I have been conducting in various fitness sites in southern Mozambique since April 2019, this article also draws on fieldwork that I carried out between 2006 and 2017. It starts with a series of ethnographic snapshots taken at some of these sites and follows with a brief introduction to Maputo’s fit young adults before tracing the role that various forms of body-work have played in successive colonial and post-colonial ethical regimes of self-improvement. I then turn to an analysis of contemporary forms of fit self-making in which I reflect on the resilience of socialist registers and show how, like the socialist modernisation project of the 1980s, contemporary projects of self-improvement also impose their own temporalities. The conclusion reflects on critiques of neoliberal subjectification.

Working Out When the Sun Sets in Maputo

The following snapshots were taken in Maputo in April 2019.

18 N. Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 20.

19 M. Foucault, ‘Technologies of the Self’, in L. Martin, H. Gutman and P. Hutton (eds), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

20 Gengenbach, ‘Boundaries of Beauty’.

21 C. Groes-Green, “‘To Put Men in a Bottle’: Eroticism, Kinship, Female Power, and Transactional Sex in Maputo, Mozambique’, *American Ethnologist*, 40, 1 (2013), pp. 102–17.

22 J.S. Archambault, ‘Sweat and the New Workout Ethic in Mozambique’ (unpublished article, 2021).

23 J. Guyer, ‘Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time’, *American Ethnologist*, 34, 3 (2007), 409–21.

24 B.E. Bertelsen, ‘Effervescence and Ephemerality: Popular Urban Uprisings in Mozambique’, *Ethnos*, 81, 1 (2014), pp. 1–28.

25 M. Nielsen, ‘Ideological Twinning: Socialist Aesthetics and Political Meetings in Maputo’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 23, S1 (2017), pp. 138–52; J. Sumich, “‘Just Another African Country’: Socialism, Capitalism and Temporality in Mozambique’, *Third World Quarterly*, 42, 3 (2021), pp. 582–98.



Figure 1. The airport square in the evening, Maputo, May 2019. (Photo by the author.)

Shortly after sundown, the square by Maputo international airport fills up with young men and women who congregate after work to work out together. The airport square is located towards the outskirts of Maputo, where some of the city's poorer neighbourhoods are found. On one of the corners, Angelo,²⁶ the leader of the *Woza Woza*²⁷ fitness association, is giving an exercise class (see Figure 1). Depending on the day of the week and on the weather, a group of 10–30 people join in after having done several laps around the square either running or walking briskly. Today is an average day that draws in about 15 participants. The men and women who are in their late 20s and early 30s replicate the moves that Angelo energetically performs in front of them. His routine includes sets of aerobics exercises, many of which are done in pairs. Some participants have proper exercise mats, some use car floor liners or a *capulana* (sarong), and others lie directly on the pavement. The more experienced members correct those who struggle to execute the exercises. Angelo is strict but also encouraging. 'You're feeling good things right now, aren't you?', he says every now and again, encouraging the class to notice how the exercises are making them feel. Throughout the class, he pays special attention to the performative dimension of the workout, commanding his students to repeat the exercises in time. He also asks everyone to dress in the same colours – blue T-shirts on Mondays, red ones on Tuesdays, and so on.²⁸ In Mozambique, most people prefer to exercise either just before sunrise or shortly after sunset, to avoid direct sun exposure. And since the sun sets relatively early in this part of the world, the *Woza Woza* exercise classes coincide with rush-hour evening traffic. The group attracts much attention from passing vehicles.

26 All names are pseudonyms unless otherwise specified.

27 *Woza* means 'come' in Shangaan, a language widely spoken in southern Mozambique.

28 Angelo later told me that he also hoped to dissuade people from wearing the same top two days in a row. I have written elsewhere on the changing relationship between class, gender and bodily substances, and the hygienic regimes that have shaped moral imaginaries around sweat; see Archambault, 'Sweat and the New Workout Ethic'.

Angelo is a charismatic young man in his early 30s who has been teaching outdoor exercise classes for several years, ‘well before fitness became popular in Maputo’, as he told me. It was while studying in Brazil that he developed a taste for physical activity and, upon his return to Maputo, he embarked on a mission to ‘convert’ as many people as possible to the joys of exercising. ‘*Woza woza*’ (‘Come, come, join us!’), Angelo calls out to passers-by in an effort to recruit new participants. After paying an initial registration fee, members are charged a monthly membership fee of about US\$10, a price accessible to the average civil servant. Membership also includes associated advantages, such as support in times of illness or bereavement, and cake on birthdays. For Angelo, who has a day job working for the national electricity company, the exercise classes are good fun, a way of keeping fit and a welcome source of additional income.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, the *miradouro* (look-out point) on Friedrich Engels avenue is also teeming with fitness enthusiasts. Overlooking the Maputo bay, this site is more exclusive and attracts people who live in the ‘cement city’ nearby, home to the upper middle class. There is a nice breeze, and the air is fresh, despite the occasional whiff of urine and faeces coming from the woods below. Some use the stairs to do sprints and jump squats. Others do triceps dips off the park benches. I join two young Mozambican women who work at the city’s liposuction clinic and who train together at the *miradouro* every other evening after work. They meet up with an older man originally from Portugal, who gives them a bootcamp-style workout. ‘He was in the army’, they tell me by way of introducing his credentials. The women both wear gloves with cut-out fingers to protect their hands from the gritty pavement when doing push-ups and planks. A few yards away, a small group gathers around a palm tree fitted with an iron rod on which ropes and elastics have been attached. The instructor also has a dozen small orange cones that he uses to make an assault course. Several of his clients are expatriates. The *miradouro* stands at the top of a steep, windy road that joggers like to run up, adding to the fitness traffic in this wealthy part of the city. Three young men stand under a lamppost, machetes in hand, selling fresh coconut water, a popular local treat that happens to be an ideal form of post-workout hydration.

By 7 p.m., *Ginásio Universo*, a few blocks down on Avenida 24 de Julho, is packed with young men and women building up a sweat. All the cardio machines on the first floor are occupied. The weight-training section on the ground floor is even busier. The air conditioning is on and the music is pumping. The wall above the mirrors is covered with motivational posters. One with a muscular young man reads, ‘don’t stop when you’re tired, stop when you’re done’. Next to it, a woman is photographed doing floor exercises while wearing a crop top that reveals multiple rolls of flesh around her waist and the caption, ‘you don’t need to be great to start, but you need to start to be great’. At this busy time of day, the young crowd consists almost exclusively of young adults who look like they have been exercising for some time. The gender ratio is almost equal, and both men and women use the space with confidence. There is not much talking. The mood is focused, almost austere. I spot one young man taking a selfie. Some are working out with a personal trainer. Everyone has a small towel to wipe their face and any trace of sweat on the equipment. Some carry a reusable water bottle, but many prefer to purchase a 1.5-litre disposable bottle from the front desk. The monthly membership fee comes to about US\$50, which is more than most Maputo residents can afford.²⁹

29 Gyms like *Ginásio Universo* follow a standard model: membership gives access to cardio and weight training equipment as well as to morning and evening group classes. Others offer more specialised fitness services, such as CrossFit or yoga.

I approach these fitness sites as urban enclaves³⁰ in which new communities of practice are formed and body-conscious subjectivities are cultivated and performed. Together, these different snapshots provide a sense of the scope of the fitness phenomenon and of its visibility across the urban landscape.

Maputo's Fit Young Adults

The young Mozambicans with whom I have been working out were born shortly after the end of the civil war (1977–92) and were in their late 20s to early 30s when I met them in 2019. Some were originally from Maputo, while others had migrated to the city later in life, generally to find higher education. Several were from relatively privileged backgrounds, with parents who had either been 'assimilated' during the colonial period or who were of mixed racial heritage. Some had grown up in houses or apartments in the city while others had experienced more precarious living conditions in the city's informal neighbourhoods. Most had been to university and the great majority had travelled abroad, at least to neighbouring South Africa, and some as far as Portugal and Brazil. Although several were unemployed at the time of my research, they generally had better access to income and resources than the average Mozambican. They consisted, in other words, of a mixture of the lucky few who had benefited from the post-war economy and those whose privilege had deeper, generally colonial and often racial, roots.

Detailing their reasons for exercising, these young Mozambicans positioned themselves somewhere along the health–beauty continuum. There were those like Ana who were first and foremost wishing to lose weight for a combination of health and aesthetic reasons. Ana had started putting on weight after a foot injury, when performing even the simplest everyday tasks had become a challenge for her. Paging through an old photo album with me, she told me that she wanted to go back to looking and feeling like she used to when she was younger. Even though she still had a long way to go before meeting her objectives – '*ainda falta*' ('there is still a long way to go'), she conceded – she was already noting an improvement in how she felt and looked. Many who fell into this broad category had, like Ana, been encouraged by a medical specialist to start exercising. They were among those who were more or less as concerned with their health as with the way they looked.

Then there were those who were primarily concerned with enhancing their appearance. Among some of the young people who fell into this category, body-work, or rather 'beauty work',³¹ was seen as closely tied to the ability to participate successfully in the intimate economy.³² Working out was thus inscribed within a broader set of techniques and technologies designed to help young people to develop the 'bodily capital'³³ that they could trade on in their intimate encounters. Anselmo was cultivating a toned but not too muscular physique, with well-defined abdominals, which he considered an essential asset in his pursuit of casual encounters with white women. Samantha, for her part, spoke of how much she enjoyed having the ability to control her appearance and to shape specific parts of her body in ways that rendered her more attractive. The health benefits of an active lifestyle were, for these young people, more a by-product of aesthetic concerns than an objective. Although many were upfront about their beauty goals, most commonly responded 'health'

30 M. Nielsen, J. Sumich and B.E. Bertelsen, 'Enclaving: Spatial Detachment as an Aesthetics of Imagination in an Urban Sub-Saharan African Context', *Urban Studies*, 58, 5 (2021), pp. 881–902.

31 A. Edmonds, *Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2010), p. 32.

32 J.S. Archambault, *Mobile Secrets: Youth, Intimacy and the Politics of Pretense in Mozambique* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017).

33 L. Wacquant, *Body and Soul: Ethnographic Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004).

(*saude*) when asked why they exercised, as health objectives ranked higher on the moral spectrum of fitness goals (see Figure 2 for a critical perspective on the ‘real’ reason why people exercise).³⁴ Fitness, in short, meant different things to different people and even different things for the same people at different points in time, since it was common for individuals to move across the continuum as they progressed along their fitness journey.

As an aspirational pursuit, fitness has become central to an increasingly popular version of middle-class identity. Across the two broad categories sketched above, several embraced the pursuit of fitness as a way of engaging in middle-class ‘boundary work’.³⁵ As for Mozambican football players during Portuguese colonial rule, the pursuit of fitness has granted these young adults ‘a means of communicating with the world’³⁶ and of claiming membership of a global category of people who find value in looking after their health and appearance. In a place where everyday life for most young people involves hustling simply to get by, participating in such seemingly non-productive forms of exertion operates as a conspicuous ‘weapon of exclusion’.³⁷ The high visibility of those working out outdoors at morning and evening rush hour, when many people face gruelling commutes, enhances through juxtaposition the exclusivity of the trend.

The pursuit of fitness has created a community of practice that brings together like-minded and, often, like-bodied individuals. Membership of this community extends and operates beyond the confines of the gym. For instance, I found that, whenever I walked around the city in my exercise clothes on my way to or from the gym, I would be greeted by others who were similarly dressed. A smile, a nod, sometimes even a ‘*boa noite*’ (‘good evening’) were exchanged in recognition of a shared interest. Moreover, walking around with a water bottle has become *the* new status symbol.³⁸

A Long History of Self-Improvement: From Colonial Regimes to Socialist Modernisation and Humanitarian Intervention

While the growing popularity of fitness in Mozambique is inspired by globally circulating ideas about wellness and neoliberal personhood that promote and reward self-improvement, discipline and responsibility,³⁹ its appeal also deserves to be located within longer histories of self-improvement, from colonial regimes of social control to the socialist modernisation project implemented shortly after the country gained independence from Portugal in 1975, and to the post-war era of neoliberal reforms that left the stage vacant for humanitarian

34 I often heard others criticise fitness enthusiasts for their self-righteousness and voice suspicion about their motives. The assumption was that they used health as a front for more superficial concerns with their appearance. The Instagram post (Figure 2) plays on this tension. I saw young women being reprimanded for exercising in public and accused of pretending to exercise when all they were looking for was men’s attention.

35 C. Lentz, ‘African Middle Classes: Lessons from Transnational Studies and a Research Agenda’, in Melber (ed.), *The Rise of Africa’s Middle Class*, pp. 17–53.

36 *Domingos, Football and Colonialism*, p. 4.

37 M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London, Routledge, 1979).

38 For a fascinating discussion on the global water-bottle market and the crafting of subjectivities around hydration, see K. Race, “‘Frequent Sipping’: Bottled Water, the Will to Health and the Subject of Hydration”, *Body and Society*, 18, 3–4 (2012), pp. 78–98. Given the unreliable quality of Maputo’s tap water, many boil and/or freeze water before consuming it, while those who can afford it might purchase filtered water. If water is often consumed on the go, it is more rarely purchased than other beverages. The conspicuous consumption of imported alcoholic beverages has long been, and for many continues to be, an important status symbol.

39 C. Freeman, *Entrepreneurial Selves: Neoliberal Respectability and the Making of a Caribbean Middle Class* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2014).



Figure 2. ‘The reason people train: 1% health, 99% to look good naked’. (Source: Instagram, retrieved 5 November 2020.)

intervention. This section retraces these initiatives while paying special attention to the ways in which body-work, in its different guises, has been invested with transformative potential.

The civilising mission that served as a rationale for colonisation justified a variety of policies aimed at transforming and shaping subjectivities, as the body of the colonised became the site of colonial and missionary intervention through labour, leisure and hygienic

regimes.⁴⁰ The Portuguese colonial state conceived forced labour, or *chibalo*, not only as a means of having the colonies fund themselves but also as a path to self-improvement. The rationale was such that '[a]ll native inhabitants of the Portuguese overseas [*sic*] are subject to the moral and legal obligations to seek to acquire through work those things which they lack to subsist and to improve their own social condition'.⁴¹ Placed under the purview of the department of 'social hygiene', sport in the British empire was meant to 'distract natives from forms of vice'⁴² while instilling in colonial subjects the discipline that would turn them into a docile workforce.⁴³ One of the key features of practising sport was its purported positive influence on time management and, as the distinction between time allocated to work and time devoted to leisure crystallised, both forms of activities came to be seen as fostering the important transferable skills of discipline and respect for the rules.⁴⁴ Yet, despite efforts to impose capitalist structures, the colonised from Brazzaville⁴⁵ to Maputo⁴⁶ and from Yaounde⁴⁷ to Zanzibar⁴⁸ made leisure their own. Many scholars have shown how football, like other European imports,⁴⁹ often served as an outlet for resistance and an avenue to political mobilisation, when it was not simply appropriated to serve one's own aspirations of self-improvement.⁵⁰ As sport sociologist Ben Carrington writes, sport 'offered a space for transcendence and utopian dreaming, often before other supposedly more important arenas of civic life were able to be changed'.⁵¹ In Mozambique, football helped to reinforce class and racial inequalities while simultaneously offering opportunities to transcend and defy colonial hierarchies.⁵² In addition to its political role, sport also had a more mundane, but no less important, social dimension.⁵³ Indeed, for many, sport afforded a rare source of entertainment and sociality, bringing people together, sometimes even creating social relations that cut across racial and class divides.⁵⁴

In Mozambique, the colonial regime of self-improvement, through sport and other means, was replaced after independence by a socialist regime that proposed a different version of, and path to, self-improvement. The temporality of the hoped-for transformation at the centre

40 A. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, Routledge, 1995); A. Masquelier, 'Dirt, Undress and Difference: An Introduction', in A. Masquelier (ed.) *Dirt, Undress and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Body's Surface* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 1–33; Martin, *Leisure and Society*; J. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999), pp. 1–33; J. Comaroff, 'The Diseased Heart of Africa', in S. Lindenbaum and M. Lock (eds), *Knowledge, Power and Practice: The Anthropology of Medicine and Everyday Life*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993), pp. 305–29.

41 A. Isaacman and B. Isaacman, *Mozambique: From Colonialism to Revolution, 1900–1982* (London, Routledge, 2019), p. 34.

42 Ranger, 'Pugilism and Pathology', p. 199.

43 See also Fair, 'Kickin' it'.

44 Martin, *Leisure and Society*.

45 *Ibid.*

46 Domingos, *Football and Colonialism*.

47 B. Vidacs, *Visions of a Better World: Football in the Cameroonian Social Imagination*. Volume 21, (Münster, LIT Verlag, 2010).

48 Fair, 'Kickin' it'.

49 Christianity created similar spaces and opportunities for political mobilisation. For a Mozambican example, see T. Cruz e Silva, 'Identity and Political Consciousness in Southern Mozambique, 1930–1974: Two Presbyterian Biographies Contextualised', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 1 (1998), pp. 223–36.

50 Martin, *Leisure and Society*; Domingos, *Football and Colonialism*.

51 B. Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics. The Sporting Black Diaspora* (Los Angeles, Sage, 2010), p. 4.

52 Domingos, *Football and Colonialism*.

53 As Laura Fair shows in her work in Zanzibar, reducing football to a political battlefield would overshadow its fundamentally social dimension; Fair, 'Kickin' it'.

54 Domingos, *Football and Colonialism*. In South Africa, sport's role in helping to transcend racial segregation was more ambiguous; F. Cleophas, 'Black Physical Culture and Weight Lifting in South Africa', in T. Cleveland, T. Kaur and G. Akindes (eds), *Sports in Africa, Past and Present* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2020), pp. 207–18.

of this project was also significantly different from the one underpinning the colonial civilising mission. The socialist modernisation of Mozambique, as envisaged by the ruling Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Frelimo) shortly after the country gained independence from Portugal in 1975, was presented with far more urgency. Under Mozambique's presidency of the charismatic Samora Machel (1975–86), Frelimo redirected its attention from the colonial enemy that it had fought during the war of liberation to what it called 'the internal enemy' (*o inimigo interno*). Frelimo insisted that, although Mozambicans had won the war of liberation against colonial oppression, the fight was far from over, as the party's rallying call – *a luta continua* (the fight goes on) – reiterated. This struggle was meant to eradicate a combination of 'modern' and 'traditional' practices and beliefs deemed to stand in the way of socialist modernisation and, in the process, to create a 'new man' (*o homem novo*) who would be willing to sacrifice individual will and advancement for the collective good.⁵⁵ What thus emerged was a very clearly defined model of moral personhood.

The logic of sacrifice normally entails either giving something up or giving one's all to a task.⁵⁶ Often, as in this case, it involved a combination of both. Frelimo's demands were arguably onerous, but these were exuberant times pregnant with promises of a better future.⁵⁷ Through propaganda, community policing and education,⁵⁸ the state encouraged each and every Mozambican to engage in introspection,⁵⁹ self-criticism became a distinguishing feature of the 'socialist aesthetics' that came to prevail.⁶⁰ According to Frelimo, 'the compromised', who had collaborated with the colonial government, required 'mental de-colonisation' and were called to embark on an 'inner combat to liberate consciousness'.⁶¹ Scores were sent to re-education camps in the northern province of Niassa.⁶² As Sumich recently observed, '[b]eing a new man, [...] a true Mozambican, was not a fixed status that could be eternally claimed; instead it was a process to which one had to continually dedicate oneself through hard work and a renunciation of the pre-revolutionary past'.⁶³

This process also entailed its own forms of body-work intervention. A paper from the National Education Conference held in 1977, titled 'The New Man Is a Process', cautioned against the idea that the new man could be created 'didactically', or, as it were, 'merely by repeating new slogans'.⁶⁴ The transformation also had to be crystallised through doing. Students, for example, were expected to spend 'a considerable amount of time engaged in physical labor, both to assist in the school's operation and to break down the colonial separation of mental from manual work'.⁶⁵ Indeed, Frelimo's socialist modernisation project focused heavily on production. The party created communal villages that were meant to

55 L. Vail and L. White, *Capitalism and Colonialism in Mozambique: A Study of Quelimane District* (London, Heinemann, 1980), pp. 45–6.

56 M. Jackson, *Life within Limits: Well-Being in a World of Want* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2011), p. 70.

57 T.R. Muller, *Legacies of Socialist Solidarity: East Germany in Mozambique* (London, Lexington Books, 2014).

58 B. Barnes, 'Education for Socialism in Mozambique', *Comparative Education Review*, 23, 3 (1982), pp. 406–19.

59 As Igreja points out, 'Machel insisted upon the idea of an "inward looking process" as a precondition for creating a national consciousness'; V. Igreja, 'Frelimo's Political Ruling through Violence and Memory in Postcolonial Mozambique', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36, 4 (2010), p. 789.

60 Nielsen, 'Ideological Twinning', p. 144.

61 Igreja, 'Frelimo's Political Ruling', p. 786.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 785.

63 Sumich, "'Just Another African Country'", p. 6.

64 Barnes, 'Education for Socialism in Mozambique', p. 413.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 409.

operate as the locus of rural agricultural production and purge cities of their ‘unproductive elements’ by rounding up the unemployed and sending them to re-education camps.⁶⁶

Frelimo also harnessed sport as a means of crafting national identity and founded the Federação Moçambicana de Atletismo (Mozambican Athletics Federation) in 1978.⁶⁷ Ideas around the integration of physical exercise into ethical projects of self-improvement and socialist modernisation also made their way to Mozambique through international socialist solidarities, which facilitated the circulation of individuals and expertise between socialist countries.⁶⁸ It was also during the socialist period that dance associations, which Frelimo regularly co-opted in state celebrations, developed into an important form of associative life across the country.⁶⁹ Membership conferred a sense of belonging and purpose while providing members with a prized source of social support and entertainment.⁷⁰ The emphasis on self-improvement as an ethical project essential to socio-economic development would be touted again, albeit in different terms, by international development agencies in the post-socialist era.

Mozambique’s socialist period was not only brief – it officially started in 1977 with Frelimo’s adoption of Marxism-Leninism and ended roughly in 1986 with the implementation of a series of neoliberal reforms at the start of Joaquim Chissano’s presidency following the untimely death of Samora Machel in 1986 – it was also overshadowed by a protracted civil war, which stifled Frelimo’s modernisation efforts. With the ending of the war in 1992 and the first multi-party elections in 1994 came new promises, along with new expectations.⁷¹ The post-war reconstruction attracted a great deal of international aid and investment, as Mozambique drew on its success in winning international support from the Soviet bloc during the Cold War while adapting to the new international landscape.⁷² By the early 2000s, aid accounted for nearly 50 per cent of state budget, and Mozambique had, in the words of some observers, become ‘aid dependent’.⁷³

Having succeeded in holding on to power even after the turn to multi-party democracy, Frelimo hastened the neoliberalisation of the economy. In the process, the party abandoned the language of ‘the new man’⁷⁴ and largely gave up on any kind of concerted ethical project of moral personhood. In doing so, the state left the stage vacant for non-governmental and religious organisations to take over this moral work,⁷⁵ much of which would, in fact, be deceptively framed in the seemingly neutral language of education. This was also a time when international development agencies harnessed sport as a site of development intervention⁷⁶ and sport was reimagined, as one observer put it, as an ‘all

66 B.E. Bertelsen, *Violent Becomings: State Formation, Sociality, and Power in Mozambique* (Oxford, Berghahn, 2016), p. 5.

67 Asociación Iberoamericana de Atletismo, *El Atletismo Iberoamericano*, available at <https://www.rfea.es/aeaa/archivos/libroiberoamericano2010.pdf>, retrieved 15 November 2020, p. 21.

68 Muller, *Legacies of Socialist Solidarity*.

69 S. Arnfred, ‘Tufo Dancing: Muslim Women’s Culture in Northern Mozambique’, *Lusotopie*, 11 (2004), pp. 39–65.

70 *Ibid.*

71 H.G. West, *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005).

72 P. de Renzio and J. Hanlon, ‘Mozambique: Contested Sovereignty? The Dilemmas of Aid Dependence’, in L. Whitfield (ed.), *The Politics of Aid: African Strategies for Dealing with Donors* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009).

73 *Ibid.*

74 Muller, *Legacies of Socialist Solidarity*, p. 3.

75 R. McKay, *Medicine in the Meantime: The Work of Care in Mozambique* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2017).

76 R. Levermore and A. Beacon, ‘Sport and Development: Mapping the Field’, in R. Levermore and A. Beacon (eds), *Sport and International Development* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); J. Shehu, ‘Introduction’, in J. Shehu (ed.), *Gender, Sport and Development in Africa* (Dakar, CODESRIA, 2010), pp. ix–xiv.

purpose social vaccine'.⁷⁷ 'Sport for development' initiatives promised to promote community development and increase individual self-esteem, conflict resolution and peace, even to contribute to a reduction of HIV prevalence.⁷⁸ Echoing earlier colonial efforts at eliminating vice and fostering a particular kind of moral personhood, these initiatives also replicated a 'deficit model' whereby deprived communities were cast as being 'in need of "development" through sport'.⁷⁹ European discourse on sports in Africa has thus commonly conveyed two contrasting images, one of a continent where sport is an import from the global north deployed as a strategy for development and one of a continent that is home to 'natural athletes'.⁸⁰ If sport for development has generally centred on team sports such as football, aerobics⁸¹ and yoga⁸² have more recently also been mobilised for 'development'. The growing appeal of fitness in Mozambique today builds on these different regimes of self-improvement, creating new social relations and new urban rhythms as well as inspiring new body-conscious subjectivities that often borrow explicitly from socialist registers.

Discipline and the Temporalities of Fit Self-Making: *A Luta Continua!*

Pitcher and Askew have shown how the collapse of socialism has often been mistakenly read as having left a blank slate on which the history of 'free market democracy' could be written. They argue that such assumptions 'devalue and ignore the interpenetration and interweaving of the old with the new order in the formulation of national policies as well as local responses to the enormous challenges that have taken place'.⁸³ This is certainly the case in Mozambique, where the socialist struggle has had a lasting legacy.⁸⁴ Like in other former socialist countries on the continent, the socialist period in Mozambique helped to forge a particular orientation towards the future that would have a long afterlife through a shared set of dispositions.⁸⁵ Still today, Mozambicans, including those too young to have experienced socialism first-hand, continue to delve into socialist registers to assess the present and imagine paths towards a better future. In fact, they have continued to do so despite concerted efforts at eradicating references to the country's socialist past through a process of 'organised forgetting'.⁸⁶ As others have noted, the continued expression of a

77 F. Coalter, 'Sport-in-Development: Accountability or Development?', in Levermore and Beacon (eds), *Sport and International Development*, p. 55.

78 For a critical take on these initiatives, see F. Coulter, *Sport for Development: What Game Are We Playing?* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013); T. Kaur, '(Un)Becoming Mountain Tigers Football Club: An Ethnography of Sports among the Western Cape's Farm Workers', *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 40, 4 (2017), pp. 290–302.

79 Coalter, *Sport for Development*, p. 3. Fokwang notes in his study of a young men's association in Cameroon that sport for development initiatives are generally framed in terms of a north–south transfer of knowledge; J. Fokwang, 'Southern Perspective on Sport-in-Development: A Case Study of Football in Bamenda, Cameroon', in Levermore and Beacon (eds), *Sport and International Development*, p. 198.

80 A.B. Leseth, 'Experiences of Moving: A History of Women and Sport in Tanzania', *Sport in Society*, 17, 4 (2014), p. 9.

81 Leseth, 'Experiences of Moving'.

82 S. Hillewaert 'Wellness through Yoga and Islamic Mindfulness: A Critical Reflection Upon New Development Discourses in Lamu (Kenya)', paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, San José, California, USA in 2018.

83 M.A. Pitcher and K.M. Askew, 'African Socialism and Postsocialisms', *Africa*, 76, 1 (2006), p. 3. See also P. Raman and H.G. West, 'Poetries of the Past in a Socialist World Remade', in H.G. West and P. Raman (eds), *Enduring Socialism: Explorations of Revolution and Transformation, Restoration and Continuation* (Oxford, Berghahn, 2009), pp. 1–26.

84 Sumich, "'Just Another African Country'".

85 M. McGovern, *A Socialist Peace? Explaining the Absence of War in an African Country* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017).

86 M.A. Pitcher, 'Forgetting from Above and Memory from Below: Strategies of Legitimation and Struggle in Postsocialist Mozambique', *Africa*, 76, 1 (2006), pp. 88–112.

socialist aesthetics does indeed seem intriguing, given all the forces against it.⁸⁷ Rather than seeing the resilience of socialist registers squarely as a critique of neoliberalism, I believe that their lasting appeal speaks to the lure of imaginaries of a better future. Today, fitness, like the socialist modernisation project once did, provides a road map for (self-) improvement. Like the scouting movement in post-war Angola, it offers, in its ‘symbolic reconfiguring’ of the ‘new man’, ‘a place to be trained not only in what *was*, but what could be’.⁸⁸

Aside from the explicit references to the socialist past captured by the CrossFit studio *A Luta Continua* (see Figure 3), I found echoes of ‘the struggle’ in various places. At Ntamo fitness centre,⁸⁹ a women-only gym in central Maputo, the walls of the staircase leading up to the studio are painted with inspirational quotes from Graça Machel, Mozambican politician and widow of Samora Machel and of Nelson Mandela (see Figure 4). The caption quote translates as ‘transformation happens only if we pursue our goals’, an undated political slogan nicely repurposed to motivate gym-goers.⁹⁰ Many Mozambicans with whom I worked out borrowed explicitly from socialist registers,⁹¹ describing their efforts in terms of an ongoing struggle in which they cast themselves as the main ‘enemy’. Maria, a woman in her 30s whom I met at Ntamo described her pursuit of fitness as a ‘*grande luta*’ (‘great fight’). Often, Maria did two back-to-back classes to get the most out of her trip to the studio. She had been exercising for nearly a year when I met her, and she assured me that she had come a long way since then. During the classes I took in her company, she showed great respect for the instructors, even when we were asked to do yet another set of often gruelling exercises. Maria expressed being disappointed with herself whenever she failed to perform the exercises correctly or to complete all the repetitions.

The prevalence of socialist registers here may have much to do with the power of the metaphor of the struggle – any righteous struggle could arguably be mobilised to this end – to capture the pursuit of fitness. Functional training in other parts of the world similarly models itself on war and natural disaster.⁹² Well-being, like fitness, does indeed deserve to be understood, as the anthropologist Michael Jackson suggests, ‘not as a settled state but as a field of struggle’.⁹³ Yet there is also something specific about the Mozambican struggle, in its ‘orientations toward the future’⁹⁴ and in its understandings of the transformative potential of body-work that colours how people today approach fitness. Scholars of Mozambique Jason Sumich and Bjorn Bertelsen show how Frelimo and the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (Renamo), Mozambique’s two main political parties, have both fostered a political ontology of imminence that casts as always ‘just out of reach’ momentous social transformation.⁹⁵ As in the political struggle, the objective – the fit(er) self – remains elusive, always ‘just out of reach’.⁹⁶ In the meantime, however, other things are gained (and

87 Nielsen, ‘Ideological Twinning’, p. 143.

88 J. Auerbach, ‘“Can We Name Ourselves Savimbi?”: Crevice Moments and Spaces of National Reimagination in the Angolan Scouts’, *Kronos*, 45 (2019), p. 138.

89 This women-only fitness studio, which opened in 2018, is particularly inclusive of Muslim women, as it offers several exercises classes in ‘silent mode’, that is, without music and in a single-sex environment.

90 I was unable to trace the source of this statement.

91 In her research on scouting in post-war Angola, Jess Auerbach similarly shows how scouting taps into ‘the socialist ideological construction of the “new man”’, while also providing a welcome form of leisure; Auerbach, ‘“Can We Name Ourselves Savimbi?”’, p. 125.

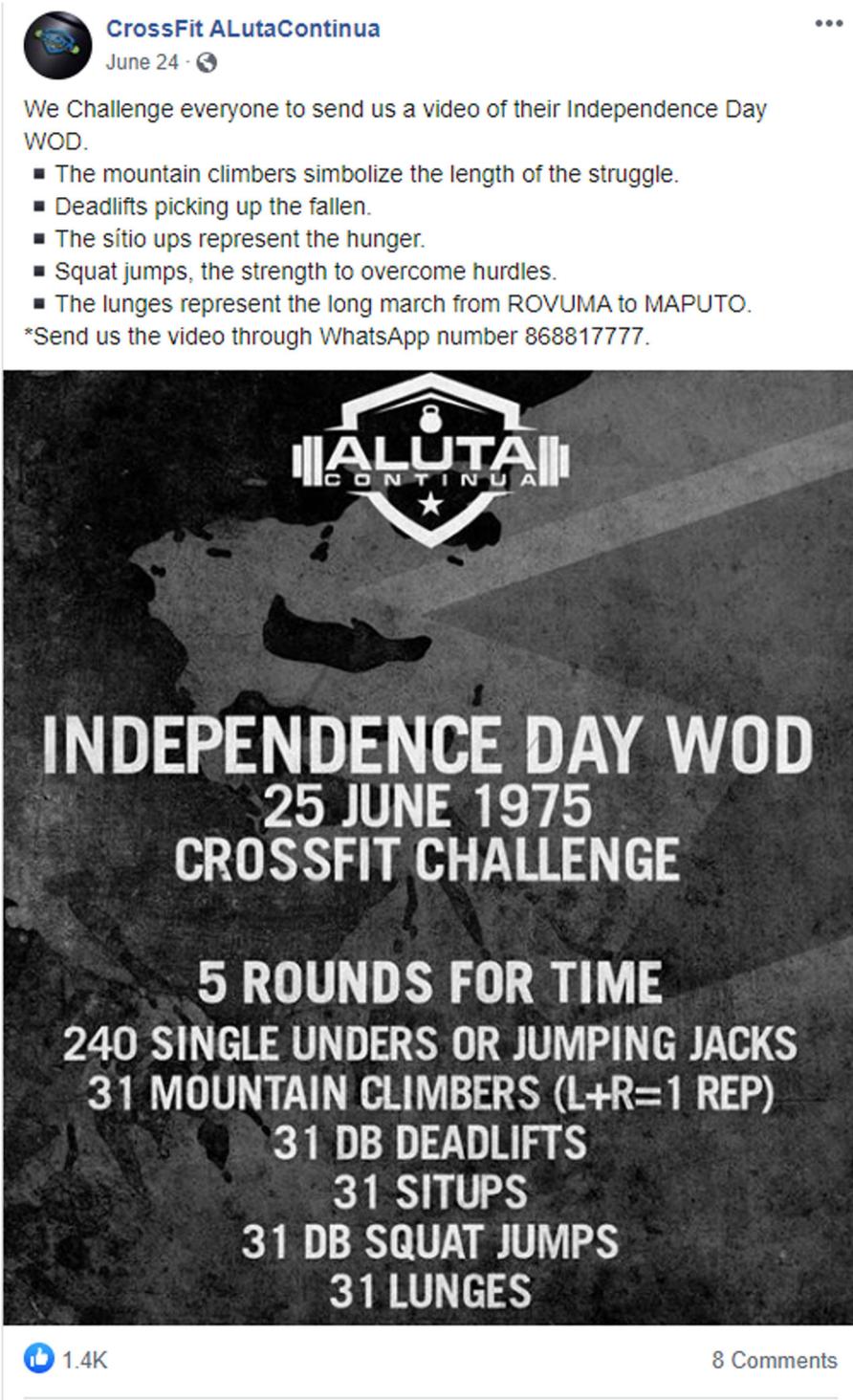
92 K.R. Hejtmanek, ‘Fitness Fanatics: Exercise as Answer to Pending Zombie Apocalypse in Contemporary America’, *American Anthropologist*, 122, 4 (2020), pp. 864–75.

93 Jackson, *Life within Limits*, p. ix.

94 McGovern, *A Socialist Peace?*

95 J. Sumich and B.E. Bertelsen, ‘Just out of Reach: Imminence, Meaning and Political Ontology in Mozambique’, *Current Anthropology* (forthcoming), doi: 10.1086/714268.

96 *Ibid.*



CrossFit ALutaContinua
June 24 · 🌐

We Challenge everyone to send us a video of their Independence Day WOD.

- The mountain climbers simbolize the length of the struggle.
- Deadlifts picking up the fallen.
- The sitio ups represent the hunger.
- Squat jumps, the strength to overcome hurdles.
- The lunges represent the long march from ROVUMA to MAPUTO.

*Send us the video through WhatsApp number 868817777.



INDEPENDENCE DAY WOD
25 JUNE 1975
CROSSFIT CHALLENGE

5 ROUNDS FOR TIME
240 SINGLE UNDERS OR JUMPING JACKS
31 MOUNTAIN CLIMBERS (L+R=1 REP)
31 DB DEADLIFTS
31 SITUPS
31 DB SQUAT JUMPS
31 LUNGES

👍 1.4K 8 Comments

Figure 3. *A Luta Continua*, CrossFit box in Maputo. (Source: Facebook page, retrieved 31 July 2020.)

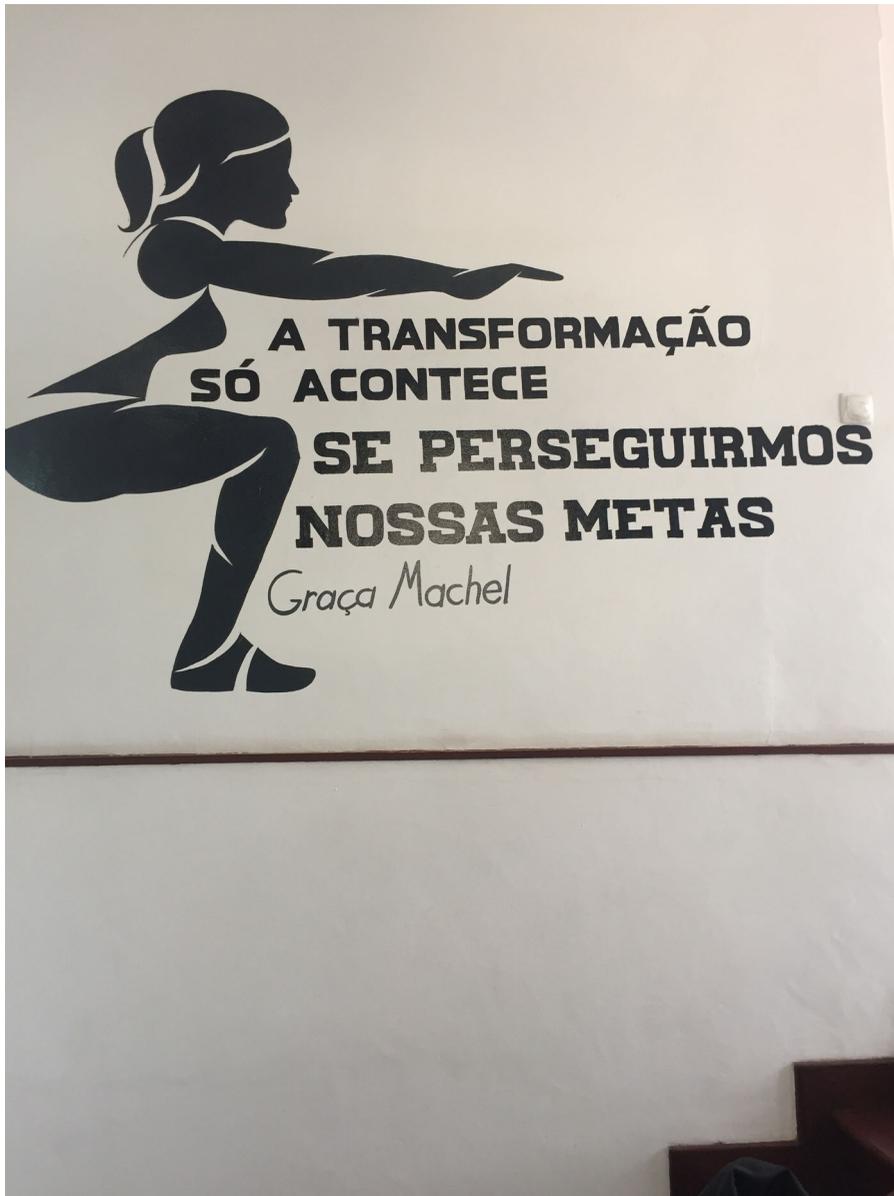


Figure 4. The writing on the wall at a women's gym in Maputo, May 2019. (Photo by the author.)

lost) along the way. And, like socialist orientations toward the future, the fitness struggle generates its own rhythms and temporalities.

'*Ate amanhã*' ('see you tomorrow') is the greeting commonly exchanged at the end of a workout. And many, like Ana, do turn up every day. From arriving on time to exercise classes to the routine of washing and drying exercise clothes and the monthly payment of membership dues, the temporal demands of fitness create a discipline that is valued for the bodily transformations that it enables. 'To see results, one needs to train every day', Alcinda reminded me (and herself), after a nearly perfect workout week. As a working mother, 'life' ('*a vida*'), as she put it, often came in the way of her workout routine. At the time, Alcinda's husband would go to the gym in the mornings while she prepared their toddler for nursery,

where she would drop him off on her way to work. Her mother-in-law would then take care of looking after the little one every other day, allowing Alcinda to go to the gym for an hour after work. Although people often had to interrupt their fitness routine – I met several gym-goers who were ‘back’ after a period of interruption, such as after Ramadan, following a pregnancy or simply after losing motivation for a time – fitness enthusiasts insisted that exercising created a rhythm in their lives that distinguished them from the rest. For some, in fact, the everyday rhythms of an active lifestyle were not only essential to achieving health and beauty objectives, they had acquired ethical value.

Betinho was living in a spacious apartment in the city centre that he rented with a friend who, like him, had grown up in Maputo. Betinho had worked as a model in South Africa and Italy and had held a stable job at an embassy in Maputo for several years. When I met him, he had just turned 30 and was unemployed. He was none the less living relatively comfortably thanks to the revenue he was able to generate by renting out the spare room of his apartment on Airbnb. Betinho trained almost every day at Ginásio Universo, which was conveniently located a stone’s throw from his place. He explained that the routine kept both his mind and body healthy, especially at this stressful period in his life as he struggled to find work. Elaborating on this point, he admitted finding it difficult to relate to, and to engage in intimate relationships with, people who did not themselves also exercise regularly. For Betinho, the concern was mainly aesthetic: he said, ‘when you’re used to dating women who work out and then you end up with a woman who doesn’t, it’s a big shock’. But he added: ‘not just in terms of body but also in terms of stamina and outlook’. Julio, another young man who also trained at Universo, framed the issue more strictly in terms of everyday rhythms. He said, ‘it’s difficult to be with someone who doesn’t have this routine of going to work and then training in the evenings’. It was common for couples to share a commitment to a more active and healthier lifestyle, and a number of the women I worked with had been introduced to fitness through a male partner, friend or relative.⁹⁷

When I met Samira at the airport square one evening in May 2019, she was working out with a female friend who lived nearby. Samira was trying to lose weight and get back into exercising regularly after a recent pregnancy that had tragically ended in a stillbirth. Her husband had introduced her to fitness a few years earlier. She recalled him urging her in these terms, ‘you have to do something ... anything, but something’. Samira had joined a gym and hired a personal trainer and, although she admitted being driven at first by a desire to please her husband, had eventually come to embrace a more active, healthier lifestyle. Her husband had also insisted on their shifting to a protein-rich, plant-heavy diet. Samira had searched online for recipes and taught herself how to cook vegan dishes by watching dozens of videos. She was particularly proud of her cashew pasta bake. Their new diet also required regular trips to South Africa, where the health-food stores had a wider selection and better prices than the ones in Maputo. When her husband left her shortly after the passing of their unborn child, Samira explained that her grief had morphed into rage, fuelling further her desire to get back in shape. As I got to know Samira better, I came to understand how important fitness was for her as a source of structure and meaning. For a number of young adults in Mozambique, like Ana, Samira and Betinho, working out had become an integral part of everyday life and fitness, a way of life with its own urban rhythms and orientations toward the near future.

Conclusion

Unlike colonial, socialist and humanitarian regimes that have attempted to impose specific modalities of self-improvement through various forms of intervention, contemporary

97 The research project has focused exclusively on individuals who identify as heterosexual.

projects of fit self-making tend to operate on voluntary grounds and therefore hold a different kind of transformative potential. Critics have argued, however, that the adoption of such ethical projects, especially in their more voluntary forms, reinforce hegemonic regimes while displacing responsibility for self-improvement on to individuals and in ways that obscure and thus depoliticise the structural causes of inequality.⁹⁸ The spread of neoliberal ideals of the self-improving, self-sufficient subject has also been seen as a justification for the failure of the welfare state.⁹⁹ Such critiques can certainly be levelled against the workout ethic that is emerging in urban Mozambique, as it reinforces the hegemony of a biomedical framework of self-improvement while flattening competing understandings of well-being. Tying into a broader aetiology that posits health and well-being as the outcome of individual behaviour, it similarly glosses over the inequalities that determine health and well-being in the first place. Although these critiques should be recognised and heeded, I argue that, if we dismiss the growing popularity of fitness as the mere encroachment of neoliberal ideals of the self-improving subject, we not only gloss over significant historical continuities but risk overshadowing the ways in which the pursuit of fitness is enhancing, in different ways, the quality of life for many. By situating contemporary projects of fit self-making within longer histories of self-improvement and by recognising the ethical value that these projects hold for those who pursue them, we gain a better sense of the appeal of fitness in specific space-times. We also move away from what are often contemptuous assessments of this global trend (and of the multi-billion-dollar industry it has spawned).¹⁰⁰ As the experiences of some of the Mozambicans introduced in this article reveal, the workout ethic emerging in Mozambique at present holds transformative potential and should not be dismissed as trivial. As global health priorities shift in response to what some observers have described as an ‘epidemiological transition’, whereby the global south is increasingly afflicted by ‘non-communicable diseases’ that were once predominantly found in industrialised nations¹⁰¹ and, more recently, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the stakes of creating and rewarding health-conscious subjectivities are being redefined. Ethnographic accounts like the one presented in this article are therefore needed to complicate understandings of the articulation between health and moral imaginaries of self-improvement.

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98 J. Elyachar, ‘Phatic Labor, Infrastructure, and the Question of Empowerment in Cairo’, *American Ethnologist*, 37, 3 (2010), pp. 452–64; T.M. Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007).

99 D. James, ‘Citizenship and Land in South Africa: From Rights to Responsibilities’, *Critique of Anthropology*, 33, 1 (2013), pp. 26–46.

100 For example, some have derided fitness enthusiasts as ‘fanatics’ (Hejtmanek, ‘Fitness Fanatics’); for more sympathetic views, see A. Meneley, ‘Walk This Way: Fitbit and Other Kinds of Walking in Palestine’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 34, 1 (2019), pp. 130–54; S. Pink and V. Fors, ‘Being in a Mediated World: Self-Tracking and the Mind–Body–Environment’, *Cultural Geographies*, 24, 3 (2017), pp. 375–88.

101 For a critical assessment of these categories, see M. Vaughan, ‘Conceptualising Metabolic Disorder in Southern Africa: Biology, History and Global Health’, *BioSocieties*, 14, 1 (2019), pp. 123–42.

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