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# Sweaty motions:

## Materiality, meaning, and the emerging workout ethic in Mozambique

### ABSTRACT

In Mozambique, class and gender have long produced sweating bodies entangled in hierarchies of care and labor. Today, the growing popularity of fitness is complicating the cultural politics of bodily substances, especially sweat. Challenging ideals of feminine propriety, new ways of sweating are fostering health-conscious subjectivities and encouraging alternative ways of becoming and relating. As a bodily “thing,” sweat sits somewhat uncomfortably within posthumanist and neomaterialist efforts at decentering the human. But our understanding of matter’s potentiality can be refined by an ethnography that apprehends sweat as a material-semiotic thing, one that operates simultaneously as matter and as an index of transformation. [*anthropology of sweat, fitness, workout ethic, bodily substances, materiality, semiotics, health-conscious subjectivities, excretion, Mozambique*]

**E**very weekday, just before sunrise and again around sunset, fitness enthusiasts take to the streets of Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. Some jog along the city’s tree-lined avenues, while small groups gather in parks and roundabouts to exercise, repurposing stairs for squat jumps and public benches for triceps dips. As a friend remarked as we drove across the city one evening, “Masport está a bater!” (Working out is in fashion!).<sup>1</sup> Only a few years ago, gyms and joggers were few and far between—I know because I have often been one of those lone joggers—and not many people would have considered exercising, let alone outdoors, in public. Indeed, Mozambique might seem like an unlikely place for a “fitness revolution” (Andreasson and Johansson 2014), yet exercising there is now all the rage.

Across the world, the pursuit of “fitness” has inspired different ways of working on and imagining the body. In addition to the perhaps more obvious ways that it engages with fat, fitness has encouraged new forms of engagement with sweat. Indeed, the latter has been invested with new meaning by globally circulating discourses on the self-improving subject (Rose 2007). There is also an important gender dimension to these moral imaginaries, since it is women in particular who are encouraged to sweat and who are applauded for doing so. As the popular fitness and wellness magazine *Women’s Health* put it, sweat was “once stigmatized” but has now become “a badge of honor” (Gainsburg 2017, 110).

In southern Mozambique, class and gender have historically produced sweating bodies entangled in hierarchies of care and labor—bodies expected to sweat for others and bodies that can avoid sweating. Today, this cultural politics of bodily substances is complicated by the growing popularity of fitness. Challenging ideals of feminine propriety, new ways of sweating and thinking about sweat are inspiring alternative ways of becoming and relating,

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and offering women novel opportunities to access urban spaces. In this article, I focus on two aspects of sweat: its rich and fluid meaning, and its “dense” (Sylvanus 2016) or, as it were, clear, materiality. It is here, at the intersection of sweat’s material and semiotic qualities, that I locate the transformative potential of changing ways of sweating and thinking about sweat. The article contributes to an “anthropology of becoming” that attends to “openings,” to emergent forms (Biehl and Locke 2017, 8; Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006), and to recent debates around the tensions between semiotic and new materialist approaches (Navaro-Yashin 2012; Newell 2018), by highlighting how sweat operates simultaneously as sign and matter of transformation.

### Sweat, a material-semiotic thing

Materially speaking, sweat is essentially water with more or less of a stink: it is clear, it becomes almost invisible once it dries, and its olfactory qualities can fairly easily be neutralized. In other words, sweat is rather inconspicuous. And this is what makes sweat particularly interesting: its inconspicuous materiality. Apprehending sweat as material-semiotic, I analyze the transformative potential of new ways of sweating in Mozambique. My intervention is located within an anthropology of materiality that recognizes the “vibrancy” of matter (Bennett 2010) and posits a relational ontology whereby material qualities are understood to exercise a certain kind of agency that is itself coproduced, in historically contingent ways, between humans and things, between subjects and objects (Miller 2010; Sylvanus 2016). Often glossed as “the material turn,” this new materialism has offered an inspiring critique of the linguistic turn and its preoccupation with meaning; it has done so by moving away from understandings of the material world as the representation of preexisting social relations or as the mere backdrop of social life (Barad 2007). More recently, posthumanist critiques have pushed some of these ideas further by drawing attention to our multispecies existence (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). Together, these different currents have spawned, as Descola (2014, 268) writes, a

project of repopulating the social sciences with nonhuman beings, and thus of shifting the focus away from the internal analysis of social conventions and institutions and toward the interactions of humans with (and between) animals, plants, physical processes, artifacts, images, and other forms of beings.

Such a project is committed to decentering the human (de la Bellacasa 2017; Tsing et al. 2017).

As a bodily “thing,” sweat sits somewhat uncomfortably within such efforts. But as suggested by the work of anthropologists interested in other bodily substances (Carsten 2019; Fontein and Harries 2013), studying sweat as

a “thing” that straddles the subject-object dualism can help refine our understanding of materiality. Thus, my ethnography of sweat in Mozambique allows me to highlight how the material qualities of sweat are inextricably entangled with the substance’s ability to signify, with its layers of meaning. Inspired by authors who have queried, to borrow Newell’s (2018) formulation, the “antisemiotic” stance prevalent among certain strands of new materialism,<sup>2</sup> I propose to approach sweat in a way that resists an either/or approach (Navaro-Yashin 2012). In doing so, I aim to avoid reducing materiality to meaning while recognizing the role of the symbolic domain in shaping material efficacy (Fontein and Harries 2013). Like other kinds of waste, sweat is “a material that has effects in the world” (Reno 2015, 558). As such, it has the potential to participate in shaping ways of becoming and relating. And sweat’s semiotic meaning is essential to these processes.

Within the anthropology of bodily substances, I found little trace of “antisemiotism.” Over the years, the anthropology of the body has moved beyond the semiotic body and shifted from an understanding of the body as a medium of cultural communication, as text, to the body as “a crucial site or nexus in the construction of subjectivities and sodalities” (Lewis 1995, 221). In doing so, it has nonetheless continued to consider meaning a critical field of inquiry (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) and remained attentive to the complementarity between representation and being-in-the-world (Csordas 1999, 151). Take, for example, Carsten’s (2011, 29) extensive work on blood, which highlights how “the metaphorical capacity of different substances is linked to their material and sensual properties” (see also Carsten 2019). Indeed, even classic symbolic anthropologists like Victor Turner did not reduce bodily substances to representations of preexisting relations (Archambault 2021b; see also Newell 2018).

As Fontein and Harries (2013) point out, however, anthropologists interested in the materiality of bodily substances have nonetheless often failed to examine the efficacy of substances beyond the meanings ascribed to their material qualities. To explore sweat’s effects beyond the changing meanings bestowed on it, while also considering its fluid symbolism, I draw on recent theorizations of the relationship between substances and the body through the notion of *absorption* (e.g., Moran-Thomas 2019; Solomon 2016). These theorizations emphasize permeability and complicate our understanding of how things convert into other things, helping us attend to how such processes are both preceded and followed by “discursive and material changes” (Solomon 2016, 5). And, as Solomon (2016, 22) nicely puts it, “Just like disease categories must be understood as multiply enacted, we might engage substances as plural and relational, as more than simply the ‘missing masses’ of objects that satisfy demands to add the nonhuman back into human stories.” We might creatively enrich

efforts to decenter the human by way of bodily substances while also critically revisiting the rationale behind such endeavors.

Although I cannot examine here in any detail the metabolic disorders that are often in the foreground of my Mozambican interlocutors' pursuit of fitness, I find Solomon's (2016) theorization of absorption useful to think beyond the boundaries between the self and the world, or between subjects and objects. When it comes to sweat, however, it is not so much absorption as excretion that is at play—a process that shares much of the anthropologically interesting features of absorption concerning permeability, more than linear transformation and its entanglement in “material-semiotic knots” through which meaning and bodies are co-constituted (Haraway 2008, 4). Not unlike absorption, excretion sets things in motion. It shapes and transforms not only bodies but also subjectivities and social relations.

Since I started this project in 2017, I have been jogging with middle-class Mozambicans along Maputo's Avenida da Marginal, taking group exercise classes in a women-only fitness studio, working out with a personal trainer at a more mainstream gym during the day, and doing outdoor boot-camp classes either at the Miradouro (a famous lookout in Maputo) or at the roundabout near the airport during rush-hour evening traffic. And, while in the smaller city of Inhambane, I participated in aerobics classes in the city center as well as in a peripheral neighborhood where a newly paved street served as an improvised workout space early in the mornings. I also walked and jogged miles around the main running track with women determined to get in shape. It was in these various sites that I started engaging with the materiality and fluid symbolism of sweat; that I saw how the growing popularity of fitness was democratizing sweating; and that I began to appreciate the broader implications of this democratization regarding the creation of subjectivities, socialites, and claims to the city. Here, I mainly draw from the research I carried out in Inhambane.

I start by situating sweat within the anthropology of bodily substances, reflecting on what sweat is and does. I then examine the cultural politics of sweat in southern Mozambique, where class, age, and gender tend to shape who sweats where and who can have others sweat for them, before turning to how an emerging workout ethic is redefining this economy in Inhambane. I show how sweat simultaneously signifies transformation and is itself transformative; I do so by widening my ethnography of sweat to therapeutic and sexual sweat, and delving deeper into sweat's material-semiotic qualities. By exploring the different antisudorific techniques deployed to control sweat, I also show how the growing popularity of fitness reveals a profound commitment to prevalent hygienic ideals and practices, even if postworkout hygienic work often failed

to normalize the unusual scene of women—of certain women—sweating in public, with all its transgressive implications. Throughout, I tease out how sweat is entangled in new forms of becoming and relating. I conclude with a reflection on how an ethnography of sweat, of a material-semiotic thing that straddles the subject-object dualism, might contribute to understandings of the potentiality of matter.

### The anthropology of bodily substances: No sweat

Sweat's rich symbolic repertoire is widely explored in literature, often working as a shorthand for, or symbol of, a variety of forms of exertion, and rarely without moral connotations. Sweat has stood as anything from a visceral marker of class distinction to a by-product of exploitation to a key symbol of work ethic. Often, as a substance with “polysemous potential” (Carsten 2019, 14), sweat works as a combination of all these things, as in Hurston's (1997) short story *Sweat*, which powerfully reflects on the tensions between virtue and exploitation, and which speaks, as one reviewer puts it, of the reality of “Southern black women in the early twentieth century, whose lot it was to ‘sweat’ for everybody—their employer and families alike” (Wall 1997, 3).<sup>3</sup>

In anthropology, by contrast, very little attention has been devoted to perspiration, an oversight that is all the more surprising given the discipline's long-standing and wide-ranging interest in bodily substances, from classic symbolic analyses (Douglas 1966; Gottlieb 1982; Turner 1967) to the anthropology of kinship and gender (Carsten 2011; Parkes 2005; Schneider 1980; Stewart and Strathern 2001; Strathern 1988) to works on political humor in the postcolony (Mbembe 1992) to studies on infrastructure and the politics of sanitation (Chalfin 2014; Robins 2014). Turner (1967, 36), in his seminal work on Ndembu ritual, was among the first to highlight the symbolism of bodily substances, revealing how particular trees, plants, and colors central to initiation rituals symbolized key bodily fluids, such as blood, milk, and semen, and the matrilineage, more broadly. The anthropology of kinship has also attended to the role of bodily substances in the construction of personhood and social relations. In his work on American kinship, Schneider (1980) showed how blood, as a shared substance, rendered kin relations distinct and enduring. With the emergence of “new kinship studies” in the late 1990s came a renewed interest in bodily substances. Departing from an understanding of kinship as the cultural construction of biological ties,<sup>4</sup> anthropologists turned to the part played by various substances, including “bones, flesh, saliva, blood, organs, breast milk, semen, and female sexual fluids, as well as hair, skin, and nails,” in creating and shaping related-

ness (Carsten 2011, 21). But there was still no mention of sweat.

If sweat has failed to make the cut, it might be because, like tears, sweat is “not related to the bodily functions of digestion or procreation” and can therefore only marginally symbolize “social relations and social processes,” as Douglas (1966, 125) suggested some time ago. It is perhaps also due to sweat’s inconspicuous materiality. But sweat’s social and material relevance becomes patent when we consider other social phenomena, such as the deep sociality of work parties (Gose 1994; Saul 1983); claims of belonging developed through the toiling of the land (Geschiere and Jackson 2006); the friendships that people form through collective suffering, whether on the battlefield or at the gym (Kelly 2016; Sassatelli 2014); and the intimacies crafted through the exchange of more-than-sexual bodily fluids (Manuel 2008). Sweat’s importance in world making does, in fact, come across nicely in a few notable contributions to Africanist anthropology. Among these, Straight’s (2007, 73–81) Samburu ethnography details how sweat, as a fundamental component of a person’s *latukuny* (bodily effluence), participates in the crafting of relatedness among persons as well as across species. Also worth mentioning is Gaibazzi’s (2013) analysis of migration in The Gambia, which attends to how sweat is invested with moral value within an agrarian ethos that celebrates hard work, self-reliance, and sacrifice for others.

Unlike other forms of bodily waste that have received considerable attention through a focus on the politics of sanitation and waste management (Chalfin 2014; Robins 2014), sweat does not require an elaborate infrastructure of disposal. And, unlike other bodily substances that tend to be secreted from a specific orifice (Mbembe 1992), sweat is also more difficult to contain through cultural norms and expectations. Perhaps it also seems pretty innocuous, although Douglas (1966) did see sweat as potentially imbued, like other bodily refuse, with power and danger. When sweat has generated interest, it has, in fact, often done so indirectly, as “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966, 36), generally bundled indiscriminately with other forms of dirt and bodily odors constructed as requiring remediation (Corbin 1986; Willis 2018). From the 19th century onward, as hygiene and moral worth became intimately entwined (Burke 1996; Hunt 1999; Masquelier 2005), repressive hygienic regimes were established to discipline the poor in Victorian England (Porter 1998), colonial subjects across sub-Saharan Africa (Comaroff 1993), and Indigenous people in settler states (Povinelli 2006). These regimes were designed not only to clean the colonized body but also to craft moral subjects. Dirt has operated as a potent interpretive category mobilized to perpetuate class and racial divides (McClintock 1995; Newell 2019). As Orwell (2004, 299–300) writes in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, “That was what we were taught—the lower classes smell.... The smell of

their sweat, the very texture of their skin, were mysteriously different from yours.” In Mozambique, the Portuguese had a specific word—*catinga*, “stench”—to describe the smell of Black bodies, which was considered distinct and offensive.

When we reduce sweat to a source of odor, however, we flatten the substance’s materiality to a single sensory dimension. Sweat might make bodies and hair smell, but it also makes bodies and hair look and feel different. Sweat can betray us, such as when it reveals effort, as it does among the Indian dancers whose sweating saris shatter the illusion of an effortless dance (Srinivasan 2012), or as in Mitchell’s (1956) account of the Kalela dance, in what was Northern Rhodesia, when young women were tasked with wiping the sweat off the dancers’ brows. Today, it is Pentecostal preachers who have their sweat wiped off during impassioned sermons, as sweat becomes entangled, in new ways, with the power to heal. Sweat can also either enhance intimacy or repulse us when sweating bodies touch. At the gym, sweating is expected and accepted, provided it remains in check—excess sweat needs to be regularly wiped off equipment. As a substance that enlists multiple senses and that is “multisensorially” apprehended (Howes 2019), sweat holds great “polysemous potential” (Carsten 2019, 14). Context is key in determining whether it is experienced as an inevitable nuisance, a sensory assault, or as pleasure enhancing.

If anthropology has shown little interest in sweat, the same cannot be said of the wellness industry. In North America, fitness became a mainstream pursuit in the 1980s, when aerobics offered women a socially acceptable way of exercising (Spielvogel 2003). Aerobics was designed to reinforce mainstream ideals about the feminine body that prevailed at the time—a body that was toned and slim—and, to help women work on perfecting their bodies while still looking feminine. As fitness guru Jane Fonda was fond of reminding her followers, “Women don’t sweat, they glisten” (Braden, n.d.). It was only more recently, as ideals of the fit female body shifted from skinny to strong (Dawson 2017), and as fitness became an end in itself rather than strictly a form of weight control (Sassatelli 2014), that women were enthusiastically encouraged to sweat and that sweat was bestowed with new meaning.

Today, sweat is entangled in a workout ethic that confers moral value to “nonproductive” physical exertion. The high-end fitness apparel retailer Lululemon (n.d.) markets activewear that promises to help fitness enthusiasts “sweat more.” The cycling app I use to train indoors during our cold Canadian winters counts my overall effort in drops of sweat—sweat currency that I can then exchange for cool gear for my cycling avatar. And in fitness publications like *Women’s Health*, sweat is mentioned even more often than fat.<sup>5</sup> But how do the shifting moral imaginaries of sweat translate in Mozambique?

## The cultural politics of sweat (and fat) in Mozambique

On my first visit to Inhambane's only gym (at the time), I asked directions from a young man dressed in green overalls who was returning empty beer crates to the bottle store. The man kindly walked me there—it was on the way—but warned that membership was “very expensive.” Raising the crates in a double bicep curl, he said that he, for one, had the luxury of exercising for free.

One late afternoon, as I was leaving for an outdoor aerobics class, I got an inquisitive look from one of the more curvaceous ladies who worked as a cleaner at the guesthouse where I was staying. When I invited her to come along, she responded, tongue in cheek, “Desenrasquei para ter esse corpo!” (I've had to do all sorts of things to get this body!), playing on the assumed correlation between wealth and body size.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Benvinda,<sup>6</sup> a successful chili sauce producer who consumes large quantities of Sparletta, a bright pink, sickeningly sweet strawberry-flavored soft drink. When I asked her whether she thought fizzy drinks were fattening, she responded with skepticism, giving the example of a very skinny man she knew who practically lived off Coca Cola. “Either way, I'm not worried about putting on weight,” she explained. “This way,” she added, “when people arrive at my house, they don't need to ask who the female head of the household is [because it's plain to see]!”

As these vignettes suggest, all with a hint of humor, “fitness” does not appeal to everyone in a cultural setting in which fatness has more commonly been considered a marker of beauty, health, and wealth (that said, fatness can also be understood as a sign of greediness; Mbembe 1992). In Mozambique, skinniness, especially in women, is commonly seen as a sign of lack—lack of health, social support, and sex appeal. Plump women, in contrast, are generally regarded as well looked after and worthy of respect. If someone says you've put on weight, they usually mean it as a compliment. People will often say, “You are getting fatter,” recognizing fatness as a process rather than as an ontological quality. To this, one will usually respond with something along the lines of “são os bons tratos” (it's that I'm being well looked after), thereby locating fatness in networks of care. In recent years, however, more and more women have started seeing “getting fatter,” or at least “getting very fat,” as a cause for concern. The growing popularity of fitness across the Global South has, in fact, often been understood as indicating the globalization of Western beauty ideals (e.g., Widows 2018), coinciding with “a profound global diffusion of negative ideas about obesity” (Brewis et al. 2011, 269). This is only partly the case in Mozambique, where fat is seen and experienced as a complex bodily substance that is socially and aesthetically valued, depending on where it is located,

and where women, in particular, have long wanted a little less here and perhaps a little more there. In pursuing fitness, then, Mozambicans are not so much adopting new ideals as they are engaging with preexisting ideals in new ways (Archambault 2021a, 523).

And while my Mozambican interlocutors were strikingly “lipoliterate,” in the sense that they read fat as an index of a person's health and morality (Graham 2005, 179), they were also *sudorliterate*, to coin an unseemly term; that is, they were mindful of the cultural politics of sweat, and more specifically of how class, age, and gender tend to determine who is expected to carry out sweat-inducing activities and who can avoid sweating. For most Mozambicans, everyday life already involves much strenuous physical activity, whether in the form of paid labor, housework, or agricultural work. And although I heard some allude to sweat as a morally valued symbol of hard, honest work, the sweat produced through productive labor was one that most ideally preferred to avoid. Arsenio, a young civil servant, spoke for many when he glossed over his lack of interest in fitness by stating that he simply did not like to sweat. He did, however, qualify his statement by adding, with a flirtatious beam, “Well, except when I'm doing *one* thing.” One often can, within the confines of the gendered and generational division of labor, avoid sweating too much by performing demanding tasks at the crack of dawn, which is one of the most active moments of the day, as everyone tries to get things done before the sun rises too high. Moving slowly is another good option. So is trying to stay in the shade. Sweat's main biological function is, after all, thermoregulation (Carrier et al. 1984).<sup>7</sup>

But not everyone can escape physically demanding work or do it when they please. Armando, a day laborer who worked unloading trucks at the market, explained, “You know how it is here, especially those of us who haven't studied, we need to sweat in order to eat.” Those who perform demanding physical labor may have dreamed of not having to sweat so much, especially in public, but they justified doing so in moral terms. “It's better than stealing to make a living,” a young cart pusher told me. In such cases, sweat was an inevitable by-product of honest work, and sweating for others was conceived as an ethical mode of care. Armando nicely captured the productive power of excretion when he told me, “My children eat my sweat.”

With age and status usually come opportunities to outsource sweat-inducing activities: you hire a maid to cook and clean for you;<sup>8</sup> you get children to run errands; you find an air-conditioned office job; you get around by taxi, and maybe one day you manage to buy a car. Many also associated physical exercise with childhood and identified, more broadly, a relationship between age, bodily practices, and the use of one's time. If adulthood came with new responsibilities, it also commanded a certain degree

of decorum, and adults were encouraged to occupy their time with more “serious” activities (dance groups are an important exception, since they can include young and old members; Arnfred 2004).

If age tends to affect one’s ability to escape and outsource sweat-inducing activities, gender plays a more ambiguous part in the cultural politics of sweat. I came across ways of thinking about different qualities of sweat in gendered terms, such as when one woman described the sweat of her boyfriend when she first met him as particularly salty and his body odor as pungent, until she showed him how to “bathe properly,” as she put it. Others argued that women were, in general, smellier than men for a number of social and biological reasons. And, given the sexual division of labor that casts men as providers and women as responsible for household management, men often end up sweating more in public and women more in private, though there certainly are plenty of women who also work hard outside their homes. In short, if how one perspires tends, to some extent, to be tied to class, age, and gender, the new ways of sweating that have accompanied the growing popularity of fitness are muddling the relationship between class and sweat, whereby the wealthy generally sweat less than the poor; the relationship between age and sweat, whereby older folks can outsource strenuous sweat-inducing tasks to the younger ones; and the relationship between gender and sweat, that has men sweating in public and women sweating at home.

#### *An emerging workout ethic on the periphery of the fitness craze*

The practice of physical activity in Mozambique is, of course, not new (Archambault 2021a; Arnfred 2004; Domingos 2017). But fitness, as a pursuit driven by a combination of health and aesthetic concerns (Maguire 2007), is a relatively novel interest. In Mozambique people dated the rise of what I call an emerging workout ethic to circa 2015, a time when the country was enjoying a wave of prosperity, however short-lived, after important oil and gas reserves were discovered in the North (Brooks 2018). The growing popularity of fitness has also coincided with the rise of the middle class (Kroeker, O’Kane, and Scharrer 2018; Mercer and Lemanski 2020; Sumich 2018), as well as with an increase in sedentary lifestyles and changing diets across the region (Frayne, Crush, and McLachlan 2014). The popularity of fitness in southern Mozambique does, however, transcend class in important ways. Indicating the broader appeal of fitness are, for example, the secondhand sellers who now specialize in activewear and the popularity of outdoor alternatives for those who find a gym membership prohibitively expensive (Archambault 2021a, 523).

In what follows, I focus mainly on the experiences of women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, from civil servants to market sellers, and from a wide range

of ages. My interest in women’s experiences owes to how changing moral imaginaries of sweat hold particularly transformative potential for women. Women were also often overrepresented in several outdoor fitness sites. What I wish to emphasize is not so much that fitness enthusiasts from different socioeconomic backgrounds imagine and experience sweat differently, though they might very well do so. Instead, I am more interested in what fitness sweat *does* to women. Despite their divergent backgrounds, none of the women I worked out with in Inhambane were part of the well-established middle class, and all had to negotiate the social implications of their pursuit of fitness in some way or another.

The city of Inhambane, a rather sleepy provincial capital of about 80,000 inhabitants, is situated on the coast of the Indian Ocean, 300 miles north of Maputo. It lies on the periphery of the fitness craze and is, therefore, an ideal site from which to explore an emerging workout ethic. Inhambane is also a city where I have been conducting research for nearly 20 years, a privilege that grants me an informed understanding of this new trend’s social implications. During the colonial period, Inhambane was a settler town, and Portuguese influences are still notable there today. The city was also home to a disproportionately high number of *assimilados*—Africans who were granted a privileged status by the Portuguese after meeting a series of criteria centered around various European customs. Owing in part to this colonial legacy, Inhambane residents have developed a sense of superiority, and I often heard people describe themselves as “the most civilized” Mozambicans. The city even prides itself on being the cleanest in the country. I have explored elsewhere the local politics of pretense whereby everyday life is carefully curated to maintain appearances (Archambault 2017), and I have seen some of these dynamics resurface as women take to public spaces to exercise.

Inhambane’s main outdoor fitness site is a half-mile running track. During the day, the space is regularly used by the nearby schools for physical education classes, whereas in the early mornings and evenings it attracts an older crowd. Some run or speed-walk around the track while others exercise on the polished concrete stage by the entrance. Some train alone, some in pairs, while others follow structured exercise classes.

When I started this project in 2017, I joined a group of a dozen women in their 50s and 60s who trained every weekday evening with a young university student named Pedro. The women all lived in the city center and many were from civil servant households. They spoke Portuguese among themselves and were either from *assimilado* families or of mixed ancestry. A number had been advised by a doctor to exercise, and some were on blood pressure medication. Several of the women self-identified as middle class, though with some hesitation, since a “proper” middle-class person should not have to exercise outside, in public (*fora*).

At the time, there were no suitable alternatives. They paid Pedro a monthly fee of 300 meticaís (about US\$5).

Pedro's classes varied greatly in style and content. Sometimes we spent the better part of the hour doing floor exercises on worn, stinky mats. Pedro often got us to do sets of old-school sit-ups, working in pairs, holding each other's ankles in turn. Sweat made our grip slip. Still, everyone agreed that this was the best way to "reduce the stomach," one of the group's main shared objectives. Sometimes we played "shark tag," or a version of handball without goals. "Agora está a animar!" (Now it's fun!), the women would exclaim in turn and at various points throughout the workout, especially during the most challenging exercises. At the end of each class, after the stretching routine, we would all huddle together, and Pedro would ask how we were feeling. This was an opportunity to praise and thank the faithful instructor, who was respectfully referred to as "Mister." On Fridays, Pedro would take the group on a brisk walk around the city. Most of the women enjoyed the walk, which they interspersed with the occasional sprint, but several were uncomfortable with the idea of being seen exercising so publicly and preferred to give the Friday classes a miss.

On a subsequent field trip in 2020, I trained with a couple of younger women who lived in one of the city's peripheral neighborhoods, a good 20-minute walk from the city center. Katarina ran a small business selling wax cloth in South Africa, and Amanda was a stay-at-home mother of two. They were both in their late 30s when I met them. And while Amanda had a husband with a stable job, Katarina was single, and her living conditions more precarious. Sometimes other women from the neighborhood or a female relative would join them. They would start by brisk-walking around the track as many times as possible while waiting for Sancho, a young man from their neighborhood who had encouraged the two friends to start exercising, volunteering to lead informal aerobics classes at the track in the evenings.

Although these two groups of women came from different backgrounds and generations, they shared a desire to become "fitter"—to look and feel good, or at least better. All were adopting new schedules, making new friends, and developing new ways of appropriating urban space. In the process, they were also cultivating new aspirations, new health-conscious subjectivities. Several had developed an interest in fitness after being diagnosed with an obesity-related health issue such as diabetes or high blood pressure. Most had been encouraged to exercise by a doctor or friend. And although they were all concerned with their waistline, I also heard many speak in more general terms of wanting to maintain a healthy organism. Their pursuit of fitness was, in other words, driven by a combination of health and beauty objectives, and as I'll show in the next section, perspiration played a central role in how these objectives were articu-

lated and addressed, since sweat was simultaneously a sign of transformation and itself transformative.

### *Excretion: Sweat as index and matter of efficacy*

In many parts of the world, perspiration is closely connected to health and is often induced therapeutically to combat illness and to restore health and well-being (Bucko 1998; van Oosterhout 2001). In southern Mozambique in particular, steam baths (*bafo*) with eucalyptus and other leaves are regularly used to relieve the symptoms of colds and flu and to treat several other diseases.<sup>9</sup> In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, some medical practitioners have encouraged the use of steam baths as a form of treatment (TVM 2020). Administering a *bafo* usually involves covering the patient with a thick blanket over a basin filled with a mixture of plants and steaming water (see also Granjo 2009, 578).

Raoul, a young traditional healer, described sweat as a good barometer of a person's health, provided one knew how to interpret it. He expressed concern for people with "closed pores" who were accumulating impurities that remained trapped in their bodies. Whether sweat is read as a sign of health, illness, or guilt, or as evidence of effort, its polysemy is tied to how the substance's fluid materiality renders underlying processes visible or olfactible, and sometimes also touchable. It is also this fluid materiality that shapes sweat's cleansing efficacy, since sweating is understood to purify other bodily substances such as blood, through the excretion of toxins and other flow-impeding impurities. Like water that cleanses the body's exterior, sweat operates as a kind of internal water that cleanses the body from the inside. Sweat, in such therapeutic settings, emerges as either a symptom of illness or as evidence of therapeutic efficacy. Sweat thus denotes more than it connotes (Filippucci et al. 2012, 211).

The women I worked out with used a similar language to describe the benefits of exercise-induced perspiration. A good workout was one that made one sweat, and fitness instructors were evaluated on this criterion. Sweat, in other words, was a gauge, a way of ascertaining that a workout was having a transformative impact on the body. Once, Katarina complained that the workout with Sancho had been too easy. To prove her point, she asked me to feel her back to confirm that it had stayed dry. Sancho challenged Katarina's assessment by blaming the strong breeze blowing that evening. Still, Katarina was left unsatisfied. When we texted each other good night later that evening, she told me she had done a series of sit-ups on her veranda after arriving home.

But sweat was also more than a sign; it was itself essential to the desired transformation. "The more you sweat, the more you eliminate toxins," the women told me. "Toxins," one of them explained, "are acids that trap fat

inside the body. That's why you need to sweat." "Sweating is healthy," they agreed. If they saw everyday sweat as a source of nuisance—something they tried to avoid or at least minimize, as detailed below—they considered sweating while working out essential to attaining their health and beauty goals. My friend Katarina went further by toying with a semantic slippage afforded by the Portuguese language between *calor* and *calorias*. *Calor*, which literally means "heat," can also stand for "sweat," and Katarina liked to say that she wanted to "see the *calorias* go with the *calor*." For fitness enthusiasts, like for healers, the complex entanglement between sweat and impurities was such that sweating was simultaneously a means to transform the body and evidence that this transformation was underway; it was both matter and sign. Thermoregulation only very rarely came up as a function of sweat.

The women I worked out with were also strong believers in the weight-loss benefits of localized sweating. Some of the middle-aged women who took Pedro's classes liked to wrap themselves up in plastic bags to sweat as much as possible. They would cut out the bottom of a large garbage bag, slip it over their heads, and slide their arms through the sides. It made a swishy sound when they moved. Some of the more affluent gym-goers in Matuto preferred to cinch their waist with a neoprene belt purposefully designed to increase localized sweating and weight loss. One of them recommended a special coconut sweat cream that "works miracles," according to her. She opened the Amazon app on her phone to show me the exact brand. Her basket was full of sweat-inducing creams and contraptions that her husband, who was away in the US at the time, would be coming back with at the end of the month.

A similar logic also applied to sexual activity. Aside from the parallels explicitly drawn between sex and exercising—for example, through the not-very-subtle euphemism of *ginástica noturna* (nocturnal exercise)—the efficacy of sexual sweat was experienced in strikingly similar ways to that of therapeutic and fitness sweat. Reporting back on a brief affair with a French tourist, my friend Ana complained that the sex had been rather average. The problem, she explained, was that the man had insisted on keeping the air-conditioning on all night and that they had therefore never managed to generate "o calor que anima" (the heat/sweat that feels good). A group of female university students discussing sexual pleasure saw sweat in a similar light.<sup>10</sup> Complaining about precocious ejaculators, one of the students stated, "If I'm not sweating, it's because you haven't done anything to me." The other two women agreed that good sex needed to make all those involved sweat, literally and metaphorically. Sweat was simultaneously integral to, and evidence of, mutual enjoyment. In these examples, the inextricable relationship between the material and the semiotic clearly comes to the fore.

### *Antisudorifics and moral hygiene*

My room has AC.

Beachboy, Tofu Beach, February 2020

The last time I was in Mozambique was during a particularly hot February. Everyone was complaining about the heat. I decided to treat myself to a day off at the beach, where I was approached by a charming beachboy who tried very hard to seduce me. He eventually walked away when even his offer of an air-conditioned room failed to sway me! Air-conditioning, or "AC," is a rare resource that can be used to denote privilege and to entice clients, perhaps even lovers, contra the female perspectives presented above. The air-conditioned office job was already a prevailing aspiration among the young men and women I followed in the early 2000s, an aspiration that tied into the cultural politics of sweat detailed earlier whereby the socially mobile can seize opportunities to avoid sweating, and then some.

Although the consensus among fitness enthusiasts was that sweating was "normal" and "healthy," sweat was nonetheless also seen as an irritant, and my fitness friends relied, like others, on antisudorific techniques and technologies to control their sweat and to allay body odor. Some turned to store-bought deodorant, "roll-on," even if only occasionally. Another trick, which was considered healthier, as well as more affordable, was to rub one's armpits with half a lemon. Men and women also generally shaved their armpits "for hygienic reasons," and I heard many reflect on the kinds of clothes and colors that better concealed sweat. Polyester was seen as a good option for mitigating the visible signs of otherwise unsightly perspiration, but with the downside of exacerbating its olfactory qualities. Many people always carried with them a handkerchief to wipe excess sweat, whereas others simply used the palm of their hand. My Mozambican interlocutors also avoided contact with other people's sweat in various ways. They commonly mentioned the overcrowded minibus taxis that most people rely on to get around the city as the epitome of unwanted exposure. Most importantly, everyone was expected to bathe regularly, ideally twice a day, and "properly" (*como deve ser*).

As a form of waste, sweat is not just a by-product of work(outs) but one that requires its own (hygienic) work. On the moral spectrum of ethical work, the sweat excreted by fitness enthusiasts might rank differently from the sweat produced by underemployed young men, or by wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law engaged in domestic work. But at the end of the day, "sweat is sweat," as one young woman put it to me, and it has to be carefully cleansed away. Fitness enthusiasts often talked about how good the shower would be after their workout and detailed how it made them feel "fresh and lighter," so much so that

showering was, for many, conceived as an integral part of any workout. Showering in Mozambique is, in fact, more than a mere hygienic practice. “It’s part of our culture,” I often heard people say about this important everyday ritual. Some were even proud of how their commitment to bathing twice a day demarcated them from Europeans (a similar scenario has been described in Botswana; see Durham 2005). A day care worker I met at one of Maputo’s fitness studios had had to ask Portuguese expatriate parents to bathe their children more regularly—a compelling example of the reconfiguration of power relations in a context of reverse migration (Waldorff 2017).

Before my departure from Inhambane in 2020, I invited Katarina and Amanda to a goodbye dinner at a restaurant in the city center. I suggested we either skip the day’s workout—“not an option,” they responded—or go right after Sancho’s class to save them from having to go home for a shower and then back into town. “All sweaty?” they asked by way of refusing this plan as well. Katarina, who owned only one set of exercise clothes she had purchased secondhand—a pair of leggings, a sports bra, and a bright fuchsia training tank that brought the outfit together—had also adopted a stringent laundry routine. She would arrive home from her workout and throw her gear in a basin with water and a spoonful of Omo washing powder, leaving the mixture to sit while she had dinner. She needed to have her outfit washed and hung to dry before going to bed if she wanted to wear it again the next day. Another young man who gave exercise classes in Maputo, where activewear was more easily accessible, had assigned specific colors to the different days of the week: “Blue T-shirts on Mondays, red ones on Tuesdays,” he told me, “to make sure that nobody wears their sweaty gear two days in a row!” Accompanying changing moral imaginaries of sweat was, in fact, a profound commitment to prevalent hygienic ideals and practices.

### *(In)conspicuous perspiration, transgression, and transformation*

For some of the women I worked out with, this hygienic work failed to mitigate the transgression of exercising in public. Many tried to be as inconspicuous about their workouts as possible. If women from privileged backgrounds were likely to have more opportunities to avoid sweat-inducing activities, ultimately what they possessed was a higher level of control over their sweat. A middle-class woman going to the gym, especially if she drove there and was dressed in the latest fitness wear, was not particularly noteworthy. Mozambicans have been exposed to these sorts of middle-class pursuits for years through Brazilian soap operas, for example. For less privileged women, in contrast, sweating in public “by choice” was more remarkable.

Unlike in Maputo, where fitness enthusiasts could often be seen proudly parading in fashionable exercise attire, fitness in Inhambane remained a marginal pursuit that had little conspicuous about it. Much of it took place in near darkness, under a streetlamp or before sunrise, and only a lucky few had workout clothes worth showing off. In 2020, I joined a third group of women who met at 4:30 every other weekday morning to exercise on one of the recently paved roads in a peripheral neighborhood. The very early start suited those who had to make it to work by seven. For Tania, a 60-something woman who sold charcoal at the market, the appeal also lay in the privacy of exercising while the city was still asleep. She had originally started training at the track in the early evenings only to be teased by people in the neighborhood, some even raising questions about her faithfulness to her husband. “Where are you going like that?” “Who are you trying to look sexy for?” she recalled them saying. Somewhat perturbed but undeterred, Tania had adapted her workout routine to shield herself from unwanted attention. In the end, this suited her fine.

Others insisted that they were, in their words, “not scared of sweating” (*não tenho medo de transpirar*). The language they used was significant. Generally speaking, “not being scared” of doing something emphasizes a willingness to disrupt class or gender expectations, yet in a way that could very well be morally valued. In most cases, this would involve someone engaging in a form of work that they could have avoided, such as a new generation of men who are “not scared of” giving a hand with household chores. Still, several of the women I worked out with at the track were concerned about being too conspicuous, even though they wholeheartedly embraced the emerging workout ethic; hence the high absenteeism at the Friday-evening walks across the city. This preoccupation with discretion was something that self-deprecating Inhambane residents saw as a distinguishing feature of their identity (Archambault 2017). Aware of this, Pedro dreamed of one day moving his classes to an indoor venue. Other fitness trainers in Inhambane expressed similar ambitions, convinced that more people would join if they could train in a private setting.

If (in)conspicuous perspiration was understood to promote good health and weight loss, simultaneously contributing to, and signifying, bodily transformation, it was also transformative in other ways: it fostered alternative ways of becoming and relating. This becomes particularly clear if we look at the impact exercising had on the lives of women like Katarina. Katarina cultivated new ways of using her time. Because she was a single woman and part-time entrepreneur who spent much of her days at home, her weekdays were reframed by the anticipation of her late-afternoon workouts. She also developed new ways of moving around the city and confidently using certain urban spaces that she would not have had access to otherwise.

In Inhambane, where women's opportunities to socialize are often confined to the home and church, the pursuit of fitness has enhanced their access to the city. And, having committed to an active and healthier lifestyle, Katarina was also more careful about her sexual health. "After devoting all these evenings to becoming healthier, I'm not then going to jeopardize my health by not using protection," she confided on one of our laps around the track.

The growing popularity of exercising has also created new social relations. Like the fat body, the fit body is relationally produced through networks of care. As the examples presented here reveal, these networks are often intergenerational, bringing together young male instructors and older female participants. Katarina made new friends at the track and strengthened older friendships. She also joked about how she might one day meet a nice man while brisk-walking around the track. "Maybe one day you enter [the track] single, and you exit married!" she said. Indeed, new ways of sweating are fostering a variety of opportunities. What the women I worked out with share is the suffering and the aspirations that sweat indexes and lubricates, not the sweat itself; this contrasts with, for example, the mythical "blood brothers" who are bonded through the exchange of blood. But the damp ankles that one holds on to in paired sit-ups, the plastic bag one helps adjust, and the beads of sweat that one notices—all these help create and strengthen new forms of sociality.

The redefinition of moral imaginaries of sweat may at first seem trivial—this was certainly my impression when I initially paged through fitness magazines, with their well-put-together models who looked like they had never actually broken a sweat, calling on women to "sweat together." Yet in Mozambique, and perhaps in North America as well, the idea that it is acceptable, encouraged even, for women to sweat is, as I hope to have shown, really quite radical. I therefore invoke the two meanings of *motion*, first as "the action or process of moving or being moved" and, second, as a proposal, to highlight how new ways of sweating are deeply political. In a place where class and gender have produced sweating bodies entangled in hierarchies of care and labor, the women embracing an emerging workout ethic are putting forward an important motion: to use and think about their bodies and urban space differently.

### Conclusion: The materiality of meaning

It will be interesting to see how the increasing popularity of fitness continues to shape moral imaginaries in southern Africa. In the meantime, the relevance of including sweat among the bodily substances worthy of anthropological attention seems undeniable. Sweat is certainly neither as vacuous, nor as asocial, as might be suggested by its overall omission from the anthropological literature, or by its inconspicuous materiality. The things we fail to notice, as

Miller (2010) reminds us, are often the ones that affect us the most. An ethnographic focus on sweat can, indeed, help us better understand a variety of human experiences. After all, no other species sweats as much as humans do (Carrier et al. 1984, 484).

Mobilizing a bodily substance to help refine our understating of materiality might seem counterproductive to efforts at decentering the human. Thinking anthropologically about sweat does, however, offer insight into emergent forms of becoming and relating not only by providing a lens to apprehend them, but also by putting into relief how bodily substances operate as material-semiotic things. Sweat and sweating are embedded in a cultural politics shaped by the substance's polysemy as both sign and matter of transformation, a polysemy that is indissociable from sweat's fluid and inconspicuous materiality. As anthropology attends to the vibrancy of matter and to the transformative potential of everyday engagement with the material world, this need not be at the expense of a careful engagement with semiotics. I take my cue from Kathleen Stewart (2018, 17), who lucidly notes in her contribution to the debate around the material turn's suspicion toward semiotics, "It's not that things don't have meaning, it's that meaning is a thing much stranger and bigger than we used to think it was." And this is why anthropology must continue to cherish ethnography that generates theory without ever fully submitting to it.

### Notes

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1. All translations are mine.
2. Newell (2018, 1) refers to the "often encountered stance against semiotic or symbolic analysis in current anthropological theory."
3. The sweatshop has also captured the imagination as the epitome of exploitative labor regimes (Prashad 1997), notwithstanding that the term actually comes from the sweating system developed in tailoring houses (Hobson 2013), not from the bodily excretions of a subjugated labor force.

4. Schneider (1984) later argued that the very concept of kinship was based on Western folk models of procreation—on the ethnocentric premise that posits blood as thicker than water.

5. According to discourse analysis carried out by Albane Gaudissart, who studied the mention of “sweat” and “fat” in *Women’s Health* issues published in 2020.

6. All names for interlocutors are pseudonyms.

7. Many also spoke of fearing that the sun would burn their skin and that they would therefore turn darker. Given the racial politics that confers real-life privilege to lighter-skinned people, this was a preoccupation that could trump concerns with sweat, even though not everyone would have readily admitted to it.

8. Even poorer households usually had someone—often a girl from the countryside—who helped with domestic labor, either for a small salary or for room and board and a chance to study.

9. Some *bafos* with roots and herbs have occult properties and are designed to address ailments with spiritual causes, that is, diseases that were “sent” by someone through witchcraft.

10. This conversation was recorded by Amanda Matabele in Maputo in June 2020.

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