Museum of Unknown Boxers

by Kurt Campbell

Lead essay by
Jean-Christophe Cloutier

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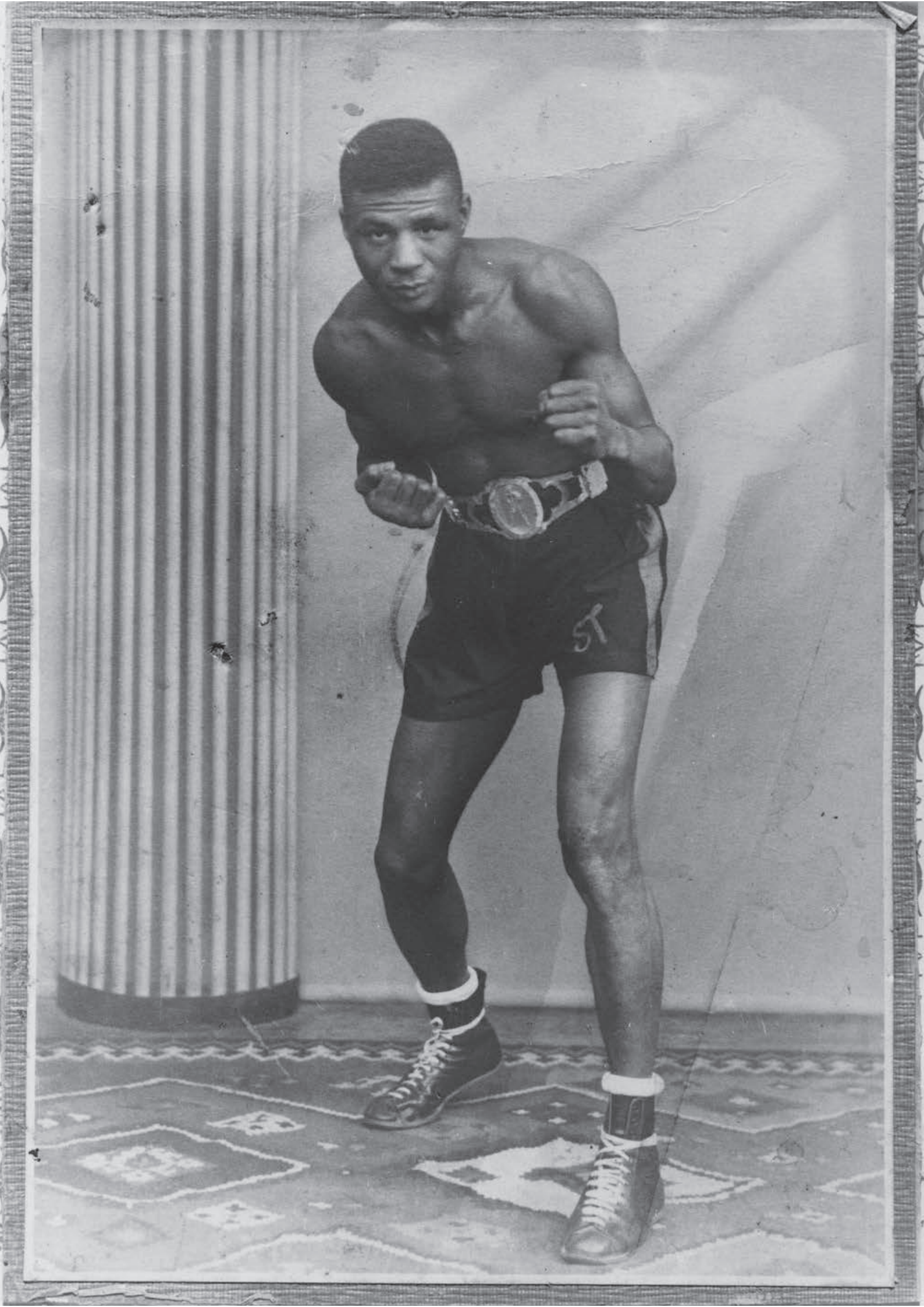

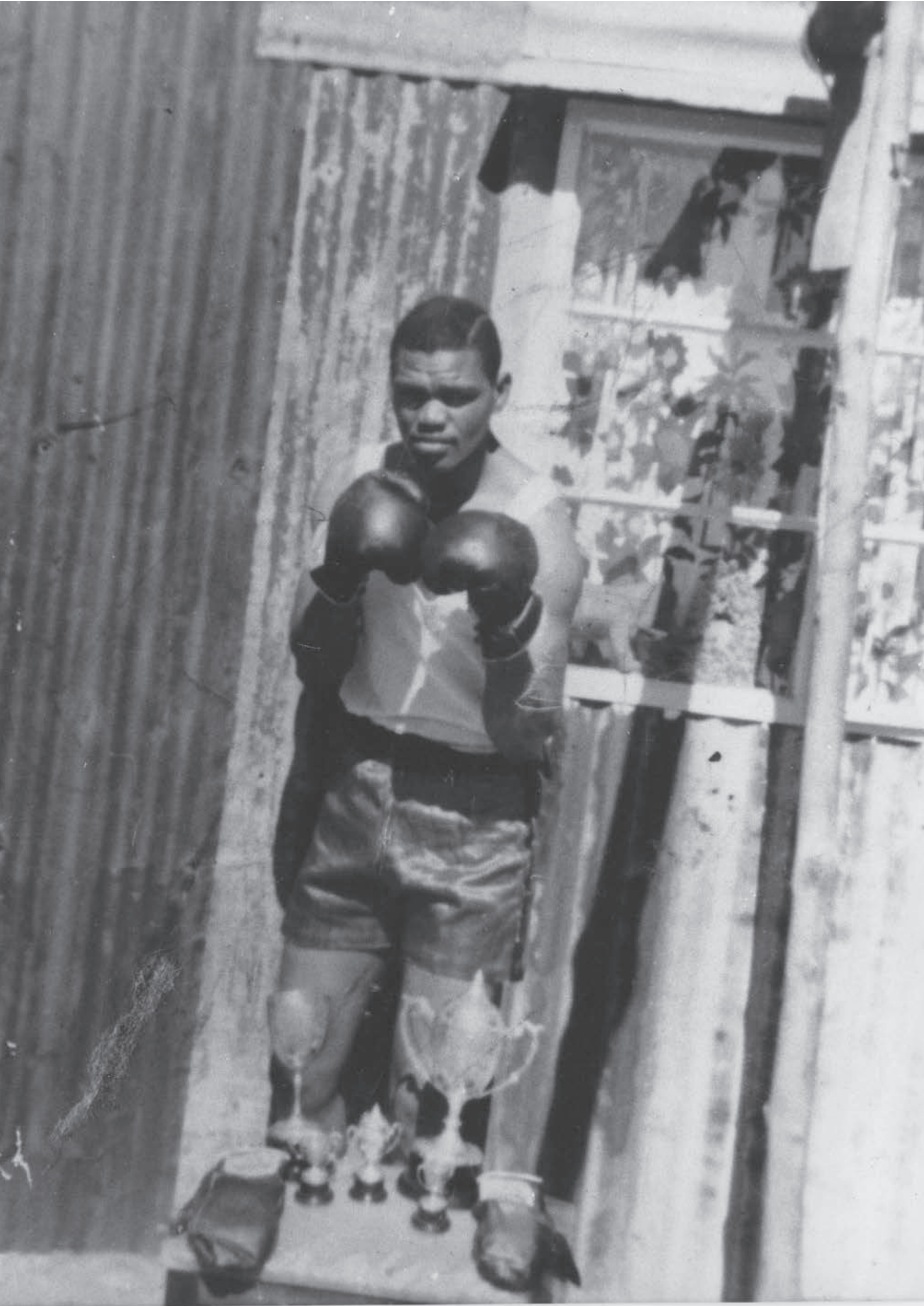

Introduction by Kurt Campbell

> " The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one stride, or that I am followed by a flood of motorcars which never catch up with me. During the period of colonization, the native never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning."
>
> *Frantz Fanon*

The epigraph that inaugurates this text about the Museum of Unknown Boxers (above) contains the central idea of what I have described in earlier writing as the 'condition of the muscular dream'. Fanon puts forward the idea that in the excess of the dreams he describes we find the true nature of the conditions of subjection that is the reality in the waking hours of the dreamer. Stated differently, the dream of physical expression of power and freedom is paradoxically not a possibility in a society governed by racialized rules that seeks to limit the expression and power of the 'black' body during the shared business of the day. It is this reality that was amplified in Apartheid South Africa as legislative control was drafted to ensure a number of restriction on the black body, giving rise perhaps most infamously to the 'pass laws' that required a document to make mobility in parts of South Africa a possibility. Restrictions were also applied to the field of boxing, with early legislative control forbidding the intermingling of black and white
bodies in the pugilistic ring (1923).

In the fractured archives of the District Six Museum and a number of private collections in Cape Town that I have been privy to, I am greeted regularly by exemplary 'black' bodies that bespeak discipline and commitment to an ideal of a sport and its codes. The muscular dream, seems a physical reality of the conditioned fighters and their powerful fighting stances that I witness. Racial segregation in the sport of boxing thus ensured that the profession of boxing was not a profitable prospect that could offer pecuniary relief. It was however of the greatest value in achieving the status of a "new man".

The new man

Tyler Fleming's The African Reigns Supreme (2011) provides a historical construction of what the author describes as the gap in history dealing with the rise of 'Africans' [sic] in boxing from the early to mid 1900's. Fleming amasses a number of sporting facts from a variety of diverse texts that deal squarely with his subject (African boxers and their ascent in the Witwatersrand 1924-1959), but is, in my reading of his text, foreclosing much of what his very sources offer up in relation to both boxing and its participants. By this I mean Fleming offers the official historical record as a voice for observations that fail to enunciate the profound social and psychological changes boxing enabled for the Witwatersrand pugilists during this era. This reading misunderstands the workings and nature of power as a potentially individual exercise, as a movement not exclusively invested in the binary of contest winner or loser.

The nature of the power I refer to is related explicitly to a conception of 'care of the self', a concept involving both the mind and body in an act of self-work. This is not to say Fleming does not tacitly register the workings of the sport on individuals. He offers the reforming power of boxing as related to the improvement of black citizens during the 1900's through a number of archival sources, including policy documents of various social reform institutions that were produced in

relation to what they hoped the sport could provide:

...reformatories for juvenile delinquents actively encouraged young men to take up boxing in the hope of redirecting their wayward behavior and redirecting their delinquent tendencies towards a more suitable and accepted outlet.
(51:2011)

Fleming further offers the sport as a masculine possibility that engendered more abstract concepts such as confidence and morality:

For both church leaders and lay people, boxing emerged as the sport that was perhaps best geared towards shaping civilized, well mannered, confident young African men. Many thought the sport introduced vital life skills to boys, which only aided in the sport's growth, or as Drum proclaimed, boxing was 'How Men Are Made!' They believed it instilled discipline, taught self-defense, and channeled youthful mischievousness in a positive direction. Furthermore, professional fighters regularly exemplified good, honest, moral lifestyles, as a fighter like Tuli was often described as 'a gentleman in and out of the ring.'
(50:2011)

Despite the identification of these social movements, that is, the incredible workings they maintain in the individual to enact the 'new man', Fleming does not link this to the ancient practice of the self. Instead, Fleming ascribes, almost exclusively, the force of his argument to the egalitarian nature of boxing, the opportunities boxing offered to engage white men, and if successful against said opponents, to thus assert and attain legitimacy. Boxing is thus ultimately linked to racial advancement in Fleming's thesis:

It does appear that African fighters did understand the symbolism of their success against the other races (both in official bouts or unofficially in sparring sessions)... Thus it does not seem farfetched to assume that some may have drawn these connections even further by seeing such achievements as examples of what Africans could achieve, and as proof that they were just as competent and capable as their white peers
(57:2011)

The paucity of this calculation is revealed in what is signaled, but not wholly engaged as a concomitant process of committed boxing practice engaging the mind and the body as it does- 'care of the self', that when imagined in a particular way, offers a formidable critique of race. The power of this oppositional stance to the psychological perversion of race constructed by the Union of South Africa that would later become the basis for the apartheid state offers the potential promise of a 'new man', and here moving beyond the idea of an improved temperament or commitment to a regime of discipline to a decidedly contrary political position to the normative order. Here I refer specifically to the unequivocal subjection and subjectivity thrust upon citizens deemed black via the law: the Native Land Act of 1913 that limited ownership of land by black people to 8% of South Africa and the Immorality Act of 1927 that forbade extramarital sex between white people and black citizens.

New man is the politically authorized consciousness of the liberated colonized subject, signaled by Albert Memmi as one who traverses a space of reflection and remaking in the colonial wake and who, although aware of the potential changes in his conditions of subjection, must commit to a sustained practice so as to make his emergence a certainty:

And the day the oppression ceases, the new man is supposed to emerge before our eyes immediately. Now, I do not like to say so, but I must, since decolonization has demonstrated it: this is not the way it happens, the colonized lives a long time before we see that really new man
(Memmi 1965: 88)

Thus, care of the self, in my reading of the rise of the black fighter, asks scholars of sport and history to see the commitment to a set of practices engaging both the mind and body as a path of flight that established new parameters and new points of validation, even as it worked in the narrowness of the formal pugilistic system of professional fighting. In this light, against Fleming's instrumentalist view of boxing, I offer boxing as an engagement within black fighters of the day that enabled a procedure closer to what the Spartans imagined boxing could be in the making of a man:

The Spartan aim in boxing and pancration, according to Philostratus, was not to win in competition, but to gain endurance – xaprepia
(Crowther 1990 : 201)

It is this endurance, this xaprepia that represents for me the invisible and somewhat abstract concept indicative of a 'modality of the self' that sought to survive the South African apartheid logic of engendering self-hatred. The nature of this hatred is perhaps most thoughtfully and affectively described by the founder of the Black Consciousness Movement-Steve Biko, who registers the danger of the apartheid state in activating a process of mental derangement that he wished to guard against in his writings:

Possibly a little should be said about spiritual poverty. What makes a black man fail to tick?... To a large extent the evil-doers have succeeded at the output end of their machine a kind of black man who is man only in form...Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the "inevitable position'.
(28:1978)

The urgent arena of scholarship in the post-apartheid is emboldened to ask more of what the archive may comfortably validate, and thus, in my critique of both the early writers and contemporaries (Fleming, a broader set of possibilities are deemed essential. These possibilities relate not only to what may be identified as modalities of self-craft, or the analytical procedures related the categories of blackness or pugilism. They relate most centrally, to opposing scholarly abstractions of the human so integral to the colonial archive. I see the work of the Museum of Unknown boxers as central to this quest precisely because the boxers who are presented in it are not available as named or 'historical' subjects. They cannot be seen as obliging shells in awe of apartheid power structures that inevitably force their subjection. No, they are instead the realities of 'muscular dreaming': physical and psychological tenacity not despite, but precisely because of social subjugation and hegemony.

How can we be sure of this knowledge claim? For me the greatest proof of a new status is evident in the practice of 'naming' professional fighters. The records I have seen often have no hint of race when fighters are described in promotional material. In contradistinction to American counterparts of the same time, no Coffee Cooler or Black Bombers exits. What we find instead is 'Homicide Hank' and 'Kid Sweety'. These names were not chosen, but crucially 'given' to the fighter who attained professional status. As such the absence of racial markers in a country defined by racial segregation at that time offers us the opening for understanding a transcendence beyond and above the subjection of the day through the sport of boxing, nothing less than 'new men'.

The work of the Museum of Unknown Boxers

To meet Dr Harry Edwards, the legendary sporting great that orchestrated the Olympic Revolt in Mexico in 1968 and author of the acclaimed "The Revolt of the Black Athlete" (1969) was a profound experience. His elegant call to action to those willing to make a positive difference in society still echos in me today. He spoke to me about the expansive possibilities that athletes can have when they take themselves and their work seriously. The results are powerful he said, and often cross social and disciplinary spaces.

As I walked back to my lodgings I realised that the visual artist was also a species of athlete, one who participates in a game of sorts to the best of her ability on a public stage so as to pose challenging social questions: the very mandate of the Museum of Unknown Boxers that is realised in this exhibition at the Stellenbosch University Museum.

The concomitant process that attends this exhibition of unknown fighters is meditating on the philosophy of consolation. This philosophy of strategically positioning those not in the winners seat to take a loss in a productive way was brought to me by Dr J.C. Cloutier who I encountered at Harvard University as we shared a working space. Dr Cloutier suggested the conceptual productivity of movies such as the later Rocky films that depicted the post heyday boxer in sophisticated ways that spoke to the successes and failures of a philosophy of consolation. He has agreed to write the essay for this exhibition (following on the next few pages), and it will surely be a most important text that holds concepts so vital for ways to live and not to die for all fighters 'unknown' who never could get a 'shot' at a title or even a consideration.

Cape Town
October 2018

The author with Dr Harry Edwards. Harvard University 2017

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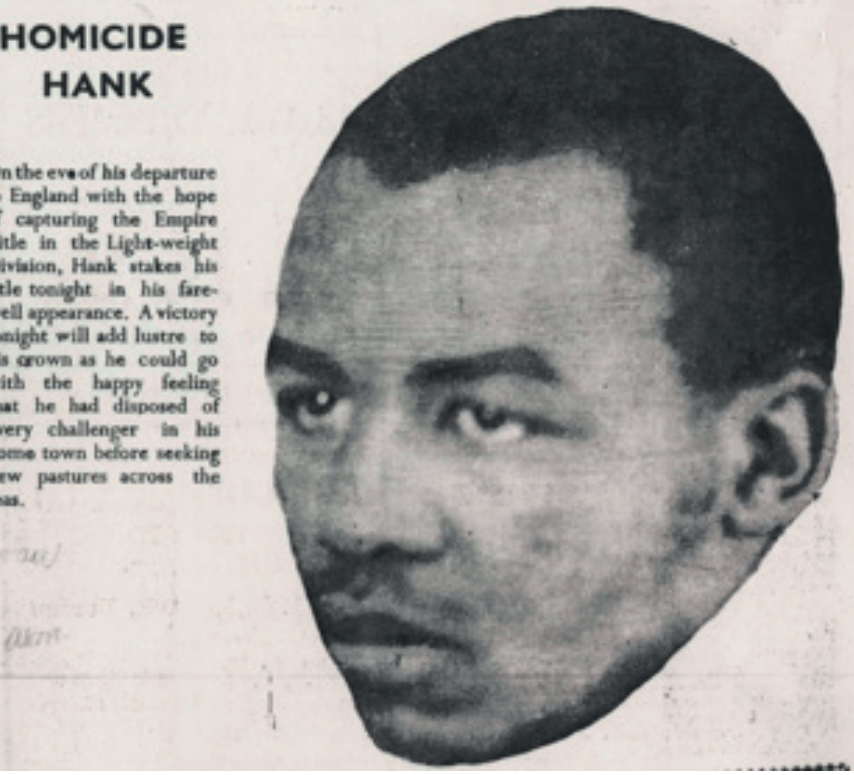
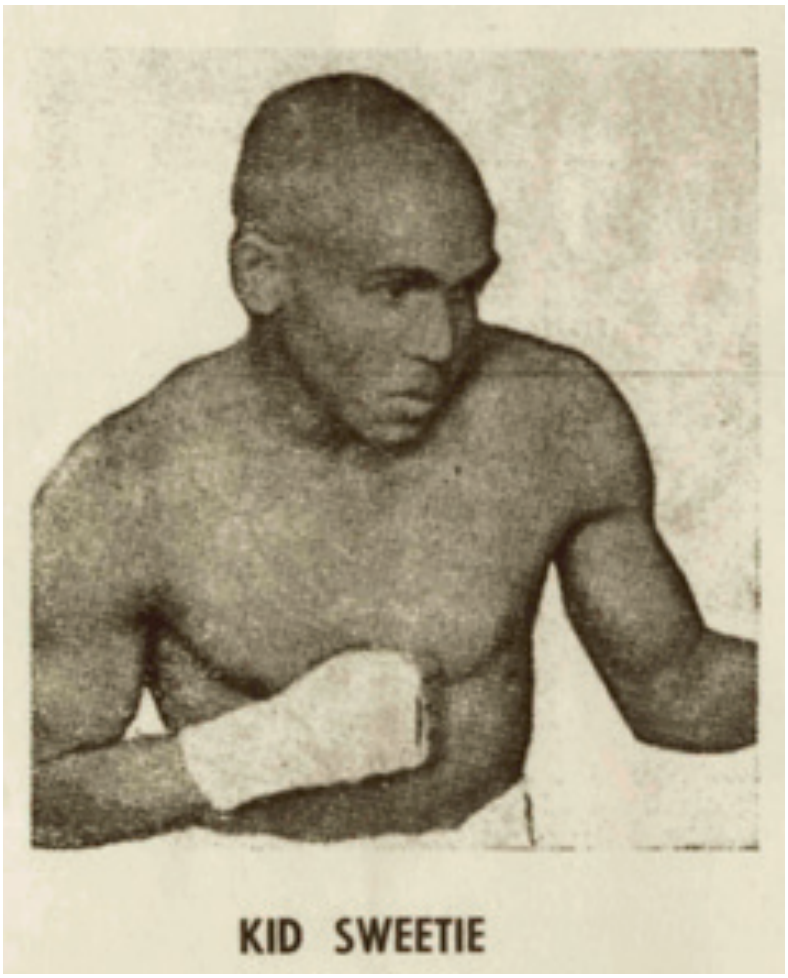
HOMICIDE HANK

On the eve of his departure to England with the hope of capturing the Empire Title in the Light-weight Division, Hank stakes his title tonight in his fare-well appearance. A victory tonight will add lustre to his crown as he could go with the happy feeling that he had disposed of every challenger in his home town before seeking new pastures across the seas.





KID SWEETIE

Going the Distance:
Rocky Balboa and the Sweet Science of Endurance

by Jean-Christophe Cloutier

We are all marks in the game of living, and we are generally expected to go on our way with no fuss even when tremendous injury has occurred. There are times, however, when a mark refuses to go quietly, when the mark is "not quite prepared to accept his loss as a gain in experience," and thus requires cooling out. Erving Goffman's classic essay, "On Cooling the Mark Out: Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure," while ostensibly about how con(fidence)men try to console their mark after a successful sting operation—how they "cool" their mark "out"—is fundamentally about how we adapt to losses of any kind, whether they be financial, personal, romantic, or otherwise. Cooling, Goffman says, is "the art of consolation," representing a set of instructions "in the philosophy of taking a loss." Taken broadly, Goffman's analysis of how a mark is cajoled into regaining an inner peace after suffering such a stinging blow can be applied to any sphere of social life. Indeed, a cynic might observe that cooling is a synonym for living, or rather, the slow process of aging human beings go through.

In this sense, the elderly represent a category of people who might most be in need of cooling out, especially if the role they spent most of their days embodying relied on the vigor of youth. An individual who has entered the age of retirement stands at the liminal moment between his heyday and his post-heyday; as Goffman would say, he is "losing one of his social lives and is about to die one of the deaths that are possible for him." How we handle or mishandle defeat is at the heart of the sports narrative, most notably boxing, a cruel world divided between winners and losers, one ruled by vitality, speed, and grace. Akin to the processes of cooling operators, boxing stories are steeped in the "philosophy of taking a loss," and nowhere is this more felt than in the stories of the "has beens" and "never will bes" of this world.

Most boxing stories, in fact, revolve around individuals who are tired of losing at life, disenfranchised persons who seek to regain a modicum of control, power, and self-respect through a dedication to the sweet science. Boxers, then, are figures who refuse to be cooled out and instead teach us how to not only endure, but stand tall, in a hostile world. The exhibition Museum of Unknown Boxers by artist-curator and scholar Kurt Campbell gathers such unsung inspirational figures, recuperating from oblivion South African Black lives that refused to cool out. The discipline and self-care that boxing training can provide, as Campbell addresses in his introductory essay, is necessarily also a training in taking a loss. Under an Apartheid regime, one could argue that taking a loss is a lot the Black man is given at birth and boxing equips one with the tenacity to go on. Getting back up after being beaten down, figuratively and literally, is what those under Apartheid were ceaselessly asked to do on a daily basis.

Erving Goffman, "On Cooling the Mark Out: Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure," Psychiatry, 15:4 (November, 1952), 451.
Goffman, 452.
Goffman, 462.

Such precarity is no way to live, yet is a way of life for any disenfranchised community, just as it is for the boxer. Yet in taking control over their precarity, these unknown boxers turned Frantz Fanon's "muscular dream" into a reality.

Fanon further underscores, in Black Skin, White Masks, how Black children found inspiration in the popular adventure stories of the 1930s and 1940s, and boxing narratives have long been a concomitant site of inspiration on a global scale. For over four decades, the one towering above all others has been the Rocky franchise. When Rocky first hit theaters in 1976, it changed the landscape of American filmmaking. The reasons for this are many, but it may boil down to the thrill of seeing a down-and-out underdog, a nobody, get a shot at the big time. More than that, since Rocky actually loses the title at the end of the first film, the audience's endearment and admiration for the character lie not in his status as a "winner" but rather in his implacable determination, his fearsome endurance in the face of adversity, his will to "go the distance." Through his performance in the ring, Rocky forces his individuality, his existence as a human being, onto the world stage and thus plucks himself out of what would otherwise have been a place within what Campbell calls the Museum of Unknown Boxers.

Yet by the time we encounter him again in the final installment of the Rocky franchise, 2006's Rocky Balboa—prior to the character's reinvention as a supporting player in Ryan Coogler's Creed (2015)—the new millennium offers up a Rocky who has receded back into the obscurity of his South Philadelphia roots, leading a quiet life as a restauranteur (Fig. A). On a symbolic level, old age ironically allows Rocky to be reinvented—the character is forcibly brought back into his status as an unknown, unproven, unheralded has-been. The demands of the sports genre become the demands of boxing itself: prove your humanity and stand toe-to-toe against your opponent in the ring. But this time, as if to strip down to its bare arthritic bones the essential fantasy that boxing has to offer, he will have to do so with a disabled body ravaged with age.

This essay is a reflection on the vicissitudes of aging and disenfranchisement in the unforgiving sport of boxing, where youth is king and age catches up with you faster than Iron Mike's jab. Concentrating on Rocky Balboa, a film that unabashedly presents the audience with an over-the-hill athlete, I want to suggest that the elderly protagonist ironically captures the essence of boxing more powerfully and holistically than that of a young, rising star.

Frantz Fanon, Black Skins, White Masks. [1952]. Trans. by Charles Lam Markmann. (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 146.
Rocky. Film. Directed by John G. Avildsen, Distributed by United Artists, 1976.
Rocky Balboa. Film. Directed by Sylvester Stallone, Distributed by MGM Distribution Company, 2006; Creed. Film. Directed by Ryan Coogler, Distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures, 2015.

Figure A. Sylvester Stallone as a bespectacled Rocky Balboa shopping for supplies for his restaurant Adrian's at the Italian market in Philadelphia. Rocky Balboa (MGM, 2006)

The old athlete forces us to question what we seek to gain from the sports film genre—perhaps from watching sports tout court; it asks us why we are so invested. Rocky Balboa is a metatextual meditation on the ways in which boxing comes to embody "the ways in which we can go or be sent to our deaths," and the Rocky character's very life becomes an exploration of how we (mis)handle defeat. Sports fans and the public in general are often fascinated by the post-retirement activities of renowned professional athletes as it offers us a glimpse into "the things we become after we have died in one of the many social senses and capacities in which death can come to us." Over-the-hill athletes like Rocky are, in a sense, "ex-persons." And, like Kid Sweetie and Homicide Hank from Campbell's Museum of Unknown Boxers, the Italian Stallion will have to reclaim his personhood and transcend his state of social subjection, quixotic though it may be, through a Spartan care of the self.

The aged athlete, at the moment of realization when the heyday is over, experiences a kind of death and will require some cooling out. If he doesn't cool out, he will never resign himself to his new fallen status and will become an embarrassment to everyone, especially those who care for him. Yet cooling out is diametrically opposed to the sports genre's ideology and hence, as I'd like to suggest, the athlete is the figure we turn to for inspiration when we need reasons not to cool out. The athlete teaches stubbornness in the face of loss, especially in the world of boxing where abdication, resignation, quitting, is the cardinal sin. Ever so seamlessly transposable into an allegory for life, the boxing ring is the site where a man's true mettle is tested—where his humanity is proven—and endowed with sweet scientific authority. Part of Rocky's peculiar genius was to demonstrate that "winning" the fight did not necessarily mean coming first on the judges' score cards—after all, he loses to Apollo Creed in the first film—but rather in "going the distance." Going the distance or, as Kurt Campbell reminds us, what the ancient Greeks called xaprepia,

Goffman, 462.
Goffman, 463.
Goffman, 463.

means taking the pain but not the loss and thus realigns one's relation to subjugation. Rocky crafts his own pugilistic path to validation and transcends loss by refusing to be cooled out.

Erving Goffman's meditation on failure found in "Cooling the Mark Out" is a useful instrument for understanding the myriad forms of losses at play in boxing's symbolic order. In thinking through the essence of the sport, I've also been inspired by Edward Said's writings On Late Style where he explores the "relationship between bodily condition and aesthetic style," an approach that was itself inspired by Theodor Adorno's posthumous essays on late Beethoven. Rocky Balboa becomes an occasion to think not only about the essence of the boxing narrative as a genre, itself showing signs of wear and tear, but also about the late aesthetic of its writer-director and lead actor, Sylvester Stallone. What happens when boxing's very ethics and aesthetics are entrusted into the arthritic hands of an old man long past his heyday?

Although I admire Said's work, I find there is a contradictory elegance to the term "lateness" that seems too youthful; the term possesses a grace and fluidity that works against that which it seeks to describe and express. There is no "inherent tension" in the term "lateness," yet it is meant to evoke a fallen, unresolved state. Thus, I turn to "post-heyday" as a category to capture an artist—or an athlete's—final phase of life, as it is my hope that there is something inherently ridiculous in post-heyday, an inanity that borders on the parodic. For there is something almost parodic in having a sixty-year-old man go up against the heavyweight champion of the world, or in an actor reprising a physical role he first played three decades earlier. Elsewhere, Adorno defines parody as "the use of forms in the era of their impossibility," which seems to be an early precursor to his later exegesis of a late style. As one of the TV commentators in Rocky Balboa calls him, Rocky has become "Balboasaurus'," an extinct creature from another, bygone era suddenly brought back to pugilistic form. And yet the film and the character were not apprehended as ridiculous, but were in fact almost universally well-received by critics and the public; it was less parody than a new installment in a beloved mythology. This is due, I'd like to suggest, to the symbolic work boxing, and athletes in general, do for us as a society.

*

Sylvester Stallone's Rocky Balboa (2006) is a narrative of obsolescence, documenting the trials of old age in a sport ruled by the young. Keeping up with the times is one of its chief concerns, and the film's use of an ESPN virtual fight illustrates a fantasy of technology as that which can offer the elderly the opportunity to keep "going the distance." Yet old Rocky, now even more of an underdog, must transcend his own digital avatar to rechannel the "natural" will and spirit of his roots that will enable him to triumph over his "robotic" rivals, as he did in his heyday. The film ultimately stages an actual and symbolic clash of temporalities, literally called "Then vs Now" in the screenplay, which in turn forges a culminating statement on an iconic character, on the sport of boxing itself, and on an old school model of masculinity engaged as it is in a negative dialectic with a newer, digital model of masculinity.

The post-heyday athlete has to compete in a sport that has become even tougher than that of his heyday, as he must now struggle with a betraying body, the anxiety over irrelevance, the threat of obsolescence. Age has brought in its wake a cataclysmic shattering of his bodily form, and just when his body's prowess is most needed, whether to provide for his family or simply to renew his own sense of worth, it instead presents itself as a shadow of its former self. What adds poignancy to the fallen state of the post-heyday protagonist is the athlete's realization of his own irrelevance—in Rocky Balboa this is shown through Rocky's sadness at the city of Philadelphia's removal of his statue, and the nostalgic pilgrimage he makes to honor his late wife, Adrian. They know that they are past their prime, that things will never be the same again. Suddenly, "going the distance" threatens to become overstaying your welcome in the popular imagination.

Edward Said On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain (New York: Random House, 2007), p.3.

In the case of Rocky Balboa, the viewer has the advantage of accessing the entire archive of Rocky's heyday in the form of five feature films all written and mostly directed by Stallone; from Best Picture Oscar-winner Rocky (1976) to the depressingly terrible Rocky V (1990), this heyday is already inscribed in celluloid and in public memory. The final Rocky film takes full advantage of this by turning all the footage from previous films into a "highlight reel" of the fights he's had in his career as a heavyweight boxer, but it also plunders this archive as a means of representing the traumatic experiences of his past, including the ghostly reappearance of his wife, Adrian, played by Talia Shire. Anyone familiar with the Rocky films will know that Adrian is crucial to the meaning of Rocky. His iconic cry, "Yo Adrian, we did it!" from the first film's finale, permanently marked her as his boxing muse. The fact that Rocky Balboa more or less opens by revealing that Adrian is dead significantly alters the stakes of the work, and is our first clear cruelty of the post-heyday world. Rocky's first words in the film, pronounced as he leaves the cemetery where his wife is buried, are: "Time goes by too fast."

In the franchise's symbolic structure, the absence of Adrian allows for a new beginning and a reassessment of the character by returning him to the solitude of his origins. On the anniversary of Adrian's death, Rocky makes a kind of pilgrimage to places that resonate with their bygone romance—at every single stop, Paulie, Adrian's brother who reluctantly accompanies Rocky on this tour around Philadelphia, asks "You done?" The question applies both to the immediate prosaic situation, as in, are you finished already so we can move on to the next stop, but it also announces the film's larger theme: is Rocky finished? At the same time, "Are you done?" also interrogates whether Rocky's trip down memory lane and nostalgia serves any purpose. When will you stop looking back and start looking forward?

The Rocky films become examples of what Richard Slotkin calls "the self-conscious reflection on the nature and meaning of 'the star' as an element in both cinematic form and public life." Relying on the audience's awareness of Stallone's heyday, the film contrasts this idealized past to the brutal reality of the fallen present. There is something both endearing and repulsive in old Rocky/Stallone. Learning that Rocky has arthritis in his neck, calcium deposits on most of his joints, that he's now a small restauranteur in South Philly rehashing the same stories from the glory days to his guests, is somehow both disturbing and comforting. On the one hand it offers a point of identification with a mythologized hero, combined with the simple pleasure of having this beloved character back, yet it also proves uncomfortable to see his brittle body no longer able to meet the requirements of a genre he's defined for over 30 years. However, the fallibility of his body also entices the audience by adding dramatic tension to the tale; should he ever get back in the ring, how could he possibly survive? Does he still have the 'eye of the tiger'?

The film sets up what will be the climactic bout early on. We learn that the current heavyweight champion, Mason 'The Line' Dixon, played by real-life boxing champ Antonio Tarver, has only faced "creampuffs" his whole career. He wins his fights, but too easily and too fast and the fans are unhappy. The boxing announcer explains, "[The fans] seem to blame Dixon, a good fighter, not only for the decline of the heavyweight division, but of the entire sport. All of boxing is hoping for a warrior who will thrill us with his passion." In other words, both Rocky and the sport of boxing itself have aged; Rocky's decline has been boxing's decline. Rocky thus becomes a symbol not only of the sport itself, but also of the city of Philadelphia which has also gone to ruin. Stallone poignantly juxtaposes the ruin of Rocky's personal life with that of his city when we see that the hockey rink where Rocky had his first date with Adrian has been razed to the ground (fig. B). The gym where he used to train with Mickey is crumbling, and the South Philly neighborhood where he used to live is falling apart (fig. C). Even the city bus doesn't go there anymore, we learn. And so we have an old man, an old sport, an old genre, and an old city trying to attain greatness once again.

Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 385.

Figure B. Demolished hockey rink in Philadelphia, Rocky Balboa (MGM, 2006)

Figure C. Rocky walks through South Philly with Lil' Mary, Rocky Balboa (MGM, 2006)

Rocky's particular sphere of significance—as with most "underdog" stories—has always been about inspiration and hope. Rocky as old man provides an alterity to his quintessential underdog symbolic stature. It is often a cliché that, when the elderly perform something special or worthy of note, it need not actually be that amazing to make the media utter platitudes along the lines of "After seeing what he was able to do, and at his age, I really feel he is an inspiration to us all." But in the case of a former giant like Rocky, he will need to really step into the ring with the current heavyweight champion and go toe-to-toe with him, an opportunity that won't be easy to come by. The film suggests a reversal of the notion of 'keeping up': on the surface, it appears to be about whether the old baby boomer can keep up with the younger generation. But this is in fact mere subterfuge, and as an audience we know it's really the opposite. After all, this is Rocky! He must carry our fantasy to the distance, otherwise we simply have no use for him. Importantly, the young men of Rocky Balboa: his own son, Lil' Mary's son 'Steps', and of course his opponent Mason Dixon, must all be shown a lesson by old Rocky. These disciples need to be inspired to change their lives through an intergenerational education in xaprepia.

When we first encounter Rocky in the film, his life now seems to hover around his restaurant, named "Adrian's". He entertains his guests with boxing stories, thereby relying on what's already gone. Even his guests seem to already know his stories by heart, as they finish his sentences for him. His life is now encapsulated in a closed loop of worn narratives. There is a palpable pathos to this fallen reality of the ex-champion, which extends to other members of his generation; one of his recurring guests is an aged Spider Rico who was the very first opponent Rocky faced in the original Rocky film. Reprising his role as Spider Rico, real-life ex-boxer Pedro Levell is precisely the kind of "Unknown Boxer" that belongs in Campbell's Museum of Unknown Boxers (fig. D). His surprise appearance in the film as a friend Rocky generously feeds for free suggests a resonant historical consciousness in Stallone.

The recurring theme "then vs now" surfaces, with Rocky constantly being faced with reminders of past triumphs. Slowly, Rocky tries to restore everything in his life back to their former glory; the city itself, in his own body, and his relationship with his son.

Figure D. Pedro Levell as Spider Rico who insists on washing dishes to repay Rocky for his generosity in Rocky Balboa (MGM, 2006).

When Rocky spots a broken light outside Lil' Marie's apartment, for instance, he later brings a new lightbulb to fix it. But you can't change your body the way one changes a lightbulb... or can you? As I'd like to suggest, the old athlete can turn to the latest technologies to have the opportunity to showcase that he's still got it. Alas, this opportunity is precisely what is often denied to the elderly, who are routinely written off in advance. In Rocky Balboa, this opportunity comes about through virtual reality technology, both on and off the screen.

Figures E-G. The ESPN virtual fight between Rocky Balboa and Mason Dixon, Rocky Balboa (MGM, 2006).

In the film, Rocky is made aware that the popular sports channel ESPN has made a virtual fight pitting his own avatar against that of current heavyweight champion Mason Dixon. Not only that, but Rocky is declared the winner by the computer (Fig. E). This virtual fight is not as far-fetched as one might think. It is based on an actual, albeit strange, historical episode: the infamous "Super Fight" between long-retired Rocky Marciano and Muhammad Ali who at the time had had his boxing license revoked for his opposition to the Vietnam War and his refusal to be inducted into the armed forces (Fig. F). In the late 1960s, radio producer Murray Woroner convinced Marciano and Ali—the "only two undefeated heavyweight champions in history"—to be filmed, for the purposes of the computer fight, to determine "who was the greatest?" In the U.S. version of the fight, Marciano is declared the winner by the computer, whereas in the European cut of the film, Ali wins the bout. Tragically, Marciano died in a plane crash three weeks after shooting the footage for the Super Fight. In Rocky Balboa, seeing his avatar emerge victorious clearly has a profound effect on Rocky, a moment played with sublime understatement by Stallone (Fig. G). The sportscaster's comment that "computer technology has to create what isn't" rubs him the wrong way. Rocky must prove that this is an incorrect assessment of reality, and the only way to do that is by getting back in the ring.

When Rocky first informs his son that he's considering fighting again, his son tells him the obvious: "People are going to think you're crazy." Rocky's reply underscores the direct association between boxing and being recognized as a human being: "What's crazy about standing toe-to-toe sayin' 'I am'?" While his son tells him that he has to "face reality," it seems that Rocky now only has eyes for the virtual.

Another inspiration is the George Foreman vs. Michael Moorer fight of November of 1994, where Foreman, then 45 years old, became the oldest man to ever hold the title of Heavyweight champion of the world.

See Sean Ingle, "The Forgotten Story of... the Rocky Marciano v Muhamad Ali Super Fight," The Guardian, November 13, 2012. Ali once joked that the computer that made him lose the fight did so due to racial prejudice as it had been manufactured in Alabama.

Figure H. Stallone's Rocky watching his digital avatar win a fight against the heavyweight champion Mason Dixon in Rocky Balboa (MGM, 2006).

The virtual fight is appropriately called, "Then VS Now" as it is literally the clashing of two temporalities.

Somehow, old Rocky passes the boxing commission's battery of medical tests "with flying colors," though they nevertheless refuse to grant him a boxing license until Rocky makes an impassioned plea. In a way, this legal hurdle shows how the old, even when qualified for a certain position or opportunity, are nevertheless disenfranchised and forbidden from doing what they desire due to prejudice. But again, the fantasy of technology comes to Rocky's rescue when Mason Dixon's managers propose a television deal for an exhibition bout between the two, thereby in effect enacting the virtual fight in reality. At first, Rocky believes this will only get him "mangled and embarrassed," but is eventually convinced to accept when they tell him, "If nothing else, you'll have new stories to tell".

Sealing his fate by agreeing to the bout, what follows is the fan favorite staple of all Rocky movies: the training montage. But this time, man and environment are united in a state of dereliction. The gym stands in a field of overgrown weeds and looks abandoned. Inside, the chains are rusted, the lighting is bad, the equipment worn. Reveling in, rather than eliding, the physical inadequacy of Rocky's body, the film gives us a great post-heyday speech, delivered by his old trainer, Duke:

You know all there is to know about fighting, so there's no sense going down that same old road again. To beat this guy, you need speed. And you don't have it. And your knees can't take the pounding. So hard running is out. And you got arthritis in your neck, and you got calcium deposits on most of your joints, so sparring is out. So what we'll be callin' on is good old fashioned blunt force trauma. Horsepower. Heavy-duty cast-iron pile-drivin' punches that will hurt so much they'll rattle his ancestors.

This is immediately followed by Bill Conti's famous score, "Gonna Fly Now," over a montage that contrasts Rocky's classic training methods—all the technologies mentioned in Duke's speech are of the old school variety: cast iron, horsepower, pile driving, blunt force—against Mason Dixon's glass-like, futuristic looking gym and speed-bag exercises. In a way, this sequence is a milder version of the Rocky IV montage that pitted 'natural man' Rocky against communist Russia's steroid-pumping Drago (Dolph Lundgren).

When the film moves to Las Vegas for the fight, we get a quick montage of Rocky's past fights, with a sports announcer explaining that Rocky was renowned for his cast iron jaw, ferocious body attacks, and will of steel. This timely reminder of his heyday shows what he's really going up against; his former self, his computer avatar. Throughout the fight, the announcers are credulous, mocking, and cynical—cracking jokes about Lipitor, arthritis, and other easy markers of old age. Unsurprisingly, Rocky takes a severe beating during the fight, and Stallone intersperses the sequence with film-negative effects and flashbacks from Rocky's past as a means of evoking the long history of ghosts haunting the old boxer—Adrian, Mickey, Paulie, his wedding, the birth of his son, it all returns.

Figures I. The brutal final fight is interspersed with film-negative effects and flashbacks, Rocky Balboa (MGM, 2006)

During this sequence, Stallone repeatedly shows us the bloody, mangled face of Rocky in close-up. As these shots add up, the audience is forced to witness the visceral damage that this sport and this life causes. It becomes difficult for the spectator not to get disgusted with the sport, as every punch seems to dislodge pieces of Rocky's traumatic heyday through visual and auditory flashes. It is a statement on the sport's sheer brutality at the same time that it clearly, yet paradoxically, celebrates the ideals of endurance.

The historical reminders from Rocky's past only emphasize our need for the underdog boxer to once again do what we've always needed him to do: to go the distance. During a break between rounds, Rocky's son tells him, "When this started everybody thought it was a joke, including me. Now nobody's laughing." True to form and to the astonishment of the sportscasters, old Rocky lasts all fifteen rounds. But the fact that Rocky can keep up was never a question for us, only for these heathen sports announcers. Only at the end does it dawn on the sportscasters that the true question has always been about whether or not the youth can keep up with a titan like Rocky. Put another way, Rocky is back, his status as a human being of value restored. The audience held on to this belief more as a hope and a desire, and the fulfillment of the old man's and the old sport's promise, the return of Rocky as fighter—not as restauranteur—grants our wishes.

At the sound of the final bell, Rocky and Dixon embrace at the center of the ring, with the old boxer giving the younger man his blessing: "You're a great champion. You got heart. Thanks for the opportunity." We are reminded that there may be countless old men and women out there with something else, something more, to prove, but they are simply not given the stage, the opportunity for working them out into reality. But to take this opportunity, to embrace new technology, the elderly must also pay a price. As Stallone said in an interview, to "get one final moment of satisfaction comes at a price — the price of humiliation or the price of skepticism. You have to be willing to pay that price." One of the film's most inspirational and oft-quoted moments is Rocky's speech to his son:

The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place, and I don't care how tough you are, it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward; how much you can take and keep moving forward.

This fatherly message evokes what Kurt Campbell calls the "discipline and commitment" to boxing, and how its "ideal and its codes" become a way of life for those who have been brought low. Appropriately, during the final round of the fight, the heart of the speech is repeated by Rocky in voice over, privileged as we are to his inner thoughts as he tries to get up from a devastating blow. Even though Rocky loses to Dixon via split decision, he does not "take the loss" since he has proven, once again, that going the distance—xaprepia— is the true measure of a winner. The crowd cheers not for the announced winner, but rather applaud the human spirit embodied in the boxer's tenacity.

The contradiction at the heart of the Rocky Balboa project, and therefore that which most associates it with Adorno and Said's theories on late style as an "unresolved tension," is that the self-made man ethos of Rocky is only given opportunity for a public stage through a deep investment in cutting-edge technology. Whereas at the narrative level, technology often means that Rocky will have to face newer, tougher opponents, as we see with the ESPN virtual fight, it is through technology that he is given the chance to show his continued relevance. The film becomes a baby boomer's fantasy of technology, as that which will offer even the weakest, most physically deprived among us, the chance to live longer and contribute to society in more meaningful ways.

As a director, Stallone had to embrace a slew of newly-available technology in order to make the film. To obtain as much realism as possible, Stallone insisted that the fight be filmed using all the trappings and equipment of a real pay-per-view HBO boxing event. To do so, he had to master the latest High Definition and digital film apparatus. As a result, the aesthetic of the climactic bout lends the fight an undeniable, immediate realism (Figs. J & K). Thus, as he himself gets old both as a performer and as a storyteller—and as the genre of boxing itself verges on obsolescence—

Figures J. See Missy Schwartz, "Sylvester Stallone Talks About Rocky's Last Bout," Entertainment Weekly, January 8, 2007.

Figures K. HBO pay-per-view graphics and cameras are used in the final fight of the film Rocky Balboa (MGM, 2006)

Stallone has to go toe-to-toe with the new technologies made available to his art form such as Motion Capture and Digital Body Scanning (Figs. L & M). As a sixty-year-old actor, Stallone turned into a kind of real-life Drago figure and relied on injections of Human Growth Hormone to bulk up his muscle mass and trained for over six months in a high-tech gym.

Figure L. Sylvester Stallone and Antonio Tarver (right) wearing motion-capture suits during the filming of Rocky Balboa (MGM 2006)

Figure M. Stallone making facial expressions to be used in creating his digital avatar for Rocky Balboa (MGM, 2006).

The final fight had to be filmed first so as to take advantage of Stallone's peak physical shape and, since the film crew was piggy-backing on a real HBO pay-per-view event taking place in Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas, the crew only had two days to shoot what would otherwise have taken nine days of shooting. The shoot proved so grueling and taxing on his body that Stallone had to spend two "nights in a hyperbaric chamber to get oxygen back."

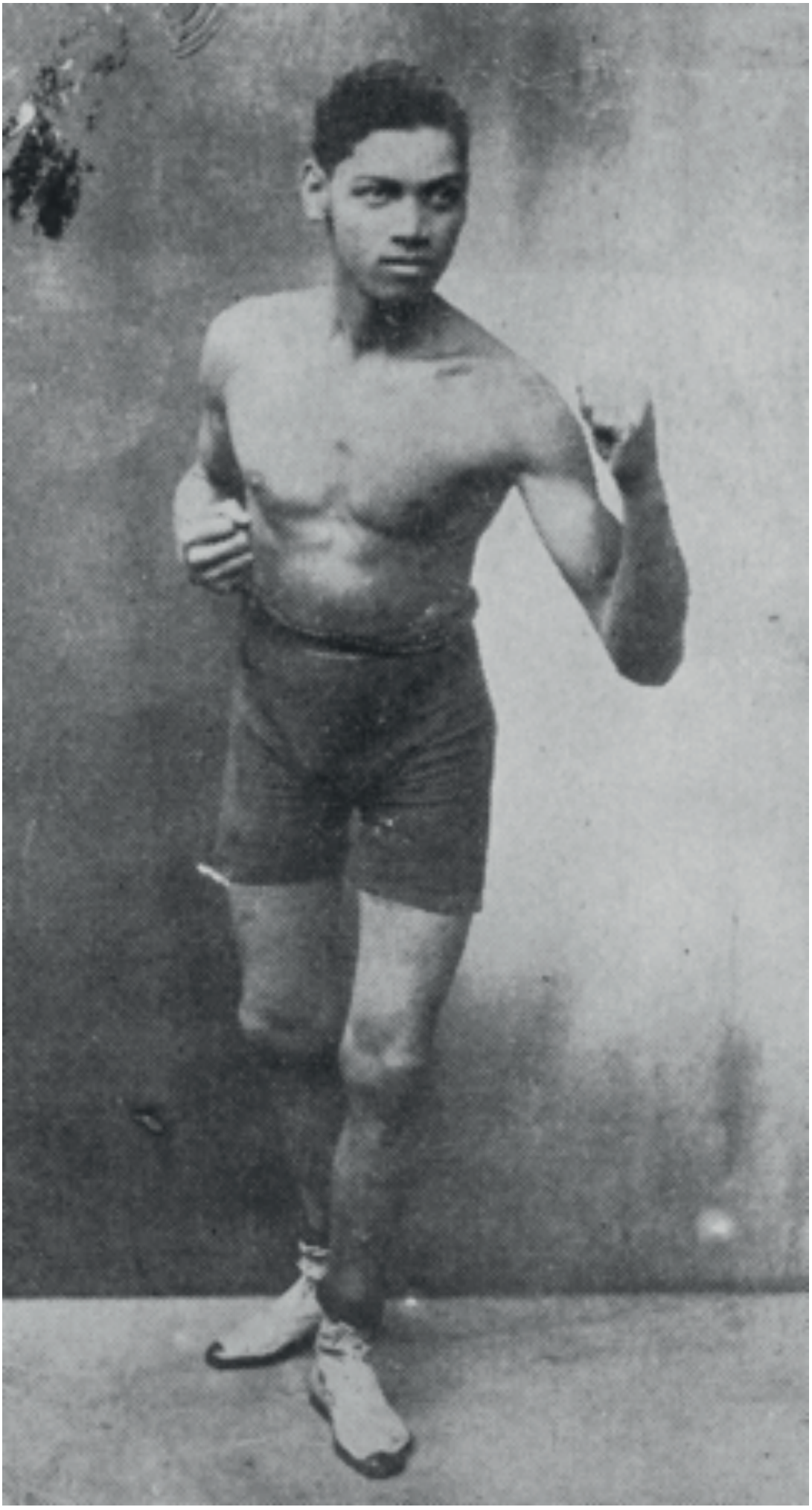
What Stallone emphasizes when he speaks of producing Rocky Balboa is that he knew this would be "the last time around." Enduring to the bitter end, to bring the character to a spiritual death with one final fight, motivates every single artistic decision taken by Stallone. He knows this is a culminating statement, he knows you can take all this only so far, that death—real and fictional death—is impending. And so for the elderly, enduring can also be about letting go; it can be a closing of the book, a ringing of the bell. There's a last time for everything, as they say, and the post-heyday artist, like the old boxer, determines his choices in light of the lastness of lateness. This last time nevertheless tampers "irrevocably with the possibility of closure," as Said says. In short, as dictated by the human condition, all you can do is refuse to be cooled out and keep going the distance, even when it's utterly absurd to do so. When the Rocky character unexpectedly reemerged in 2015's Creed, this time as a pugilistic seer and mentor to the young Black fighter Adonis Creed, son of the late Apollo Creed, he once again had to embody the essence of what boxing means. Not by stepping back into the ring, but by battling the cancer within and demonstrating to the younger generation, through sheer physical and psychological fortitude, what it takes to survive in a hostile world.

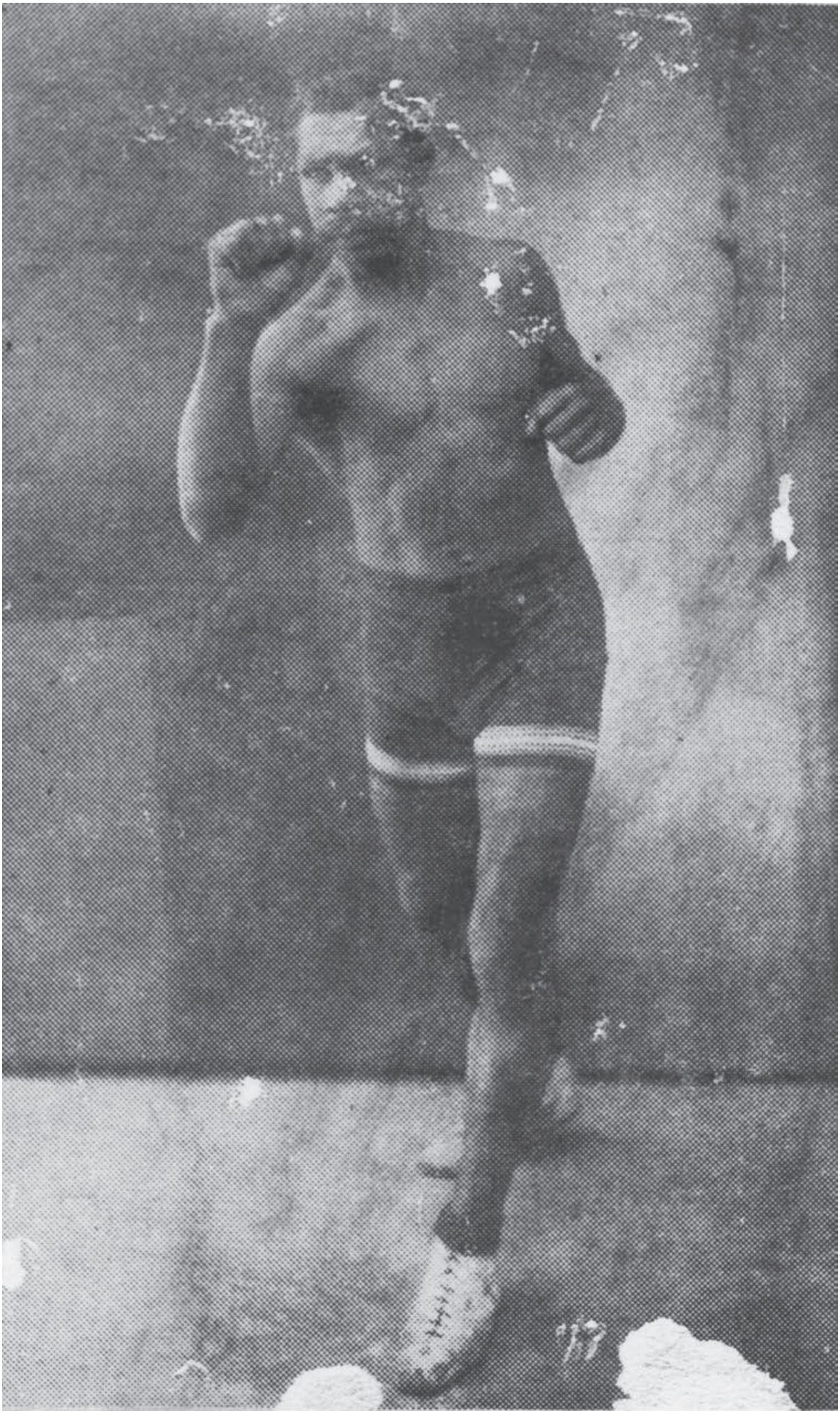
Interview with Stallone, special features on DVD for Rocky Balboa (MGM, 2006).

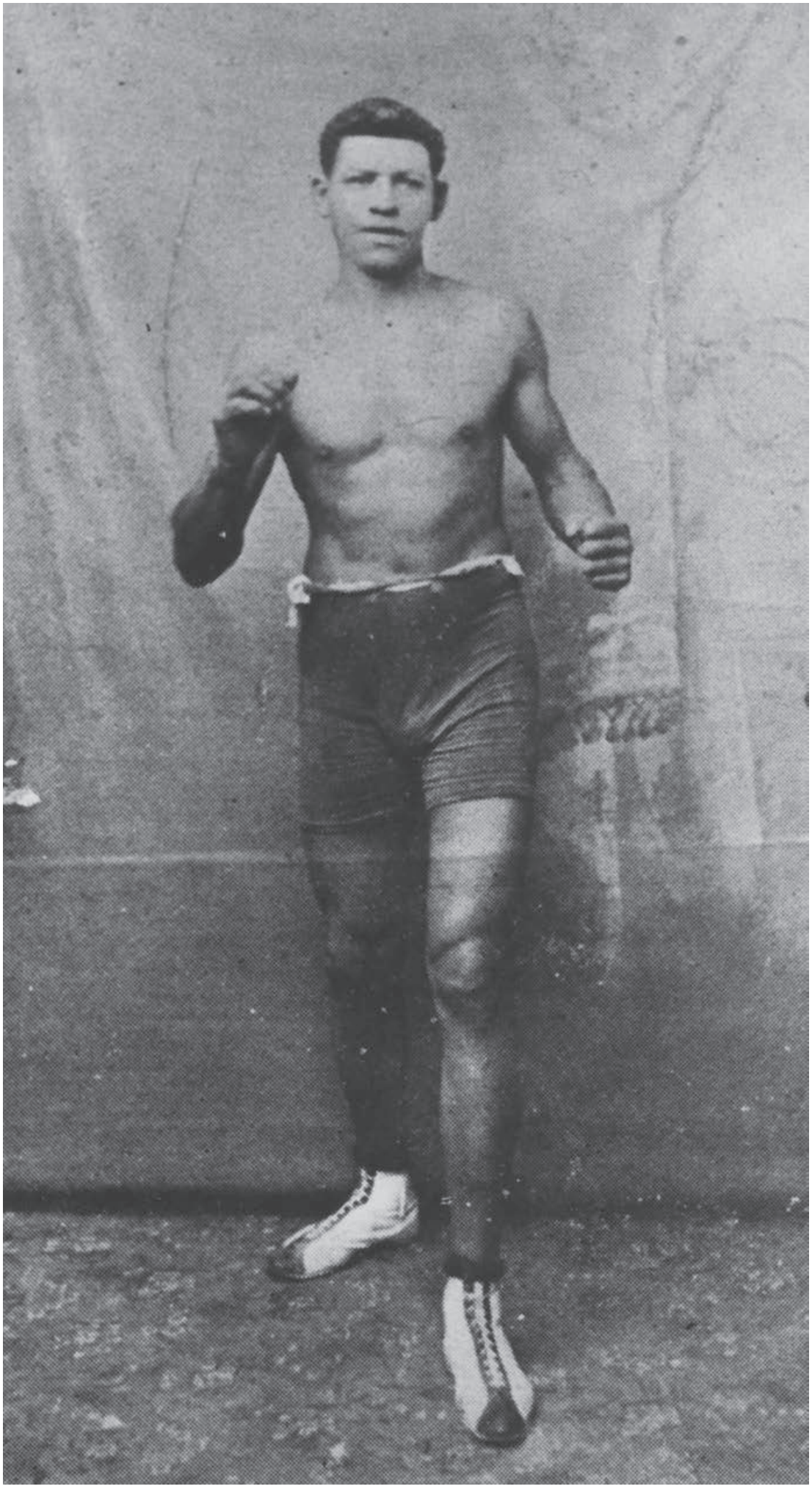
Written in Philadelphia,
2018

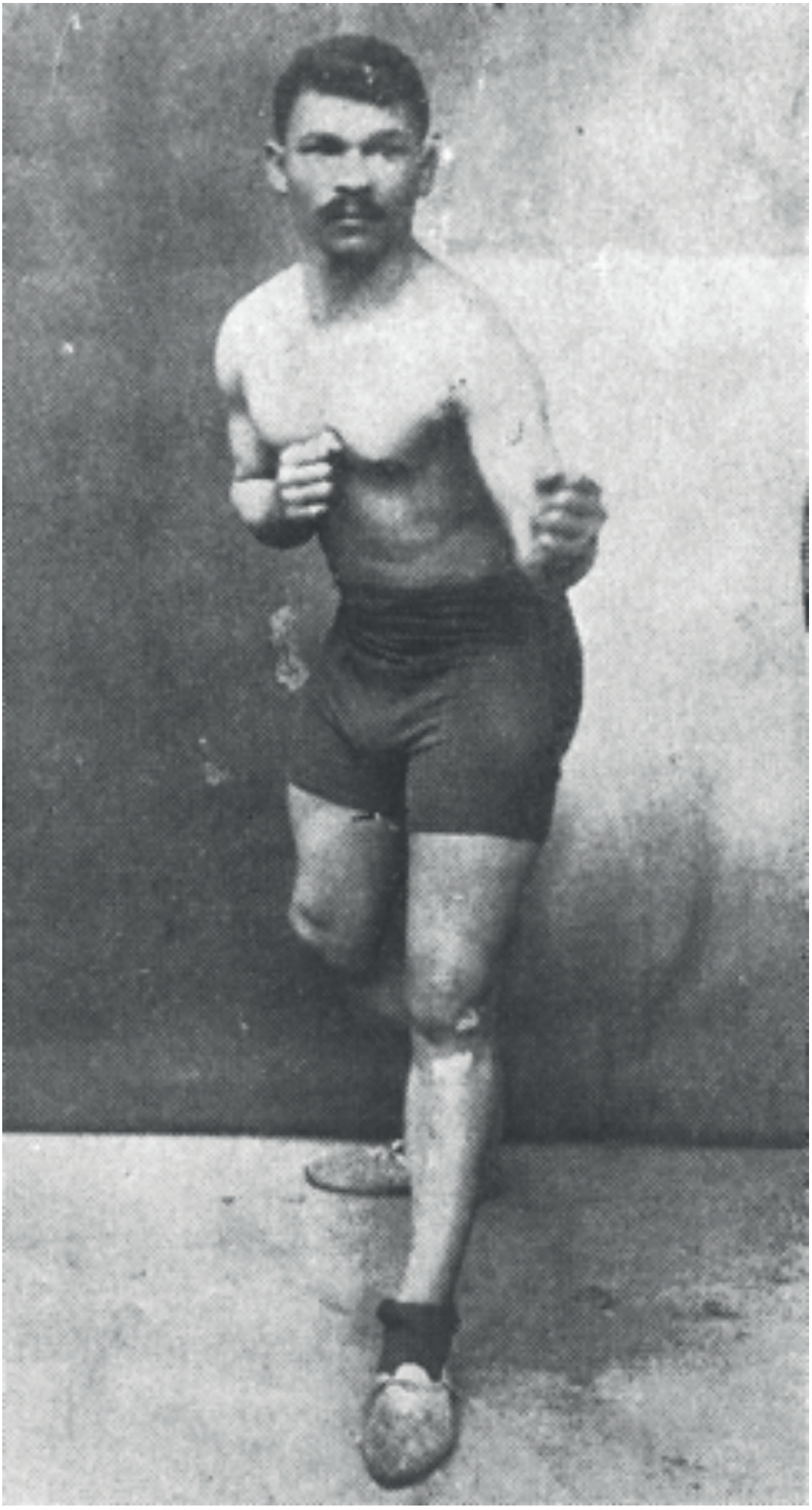
Edward Said, On Late Style, 7.

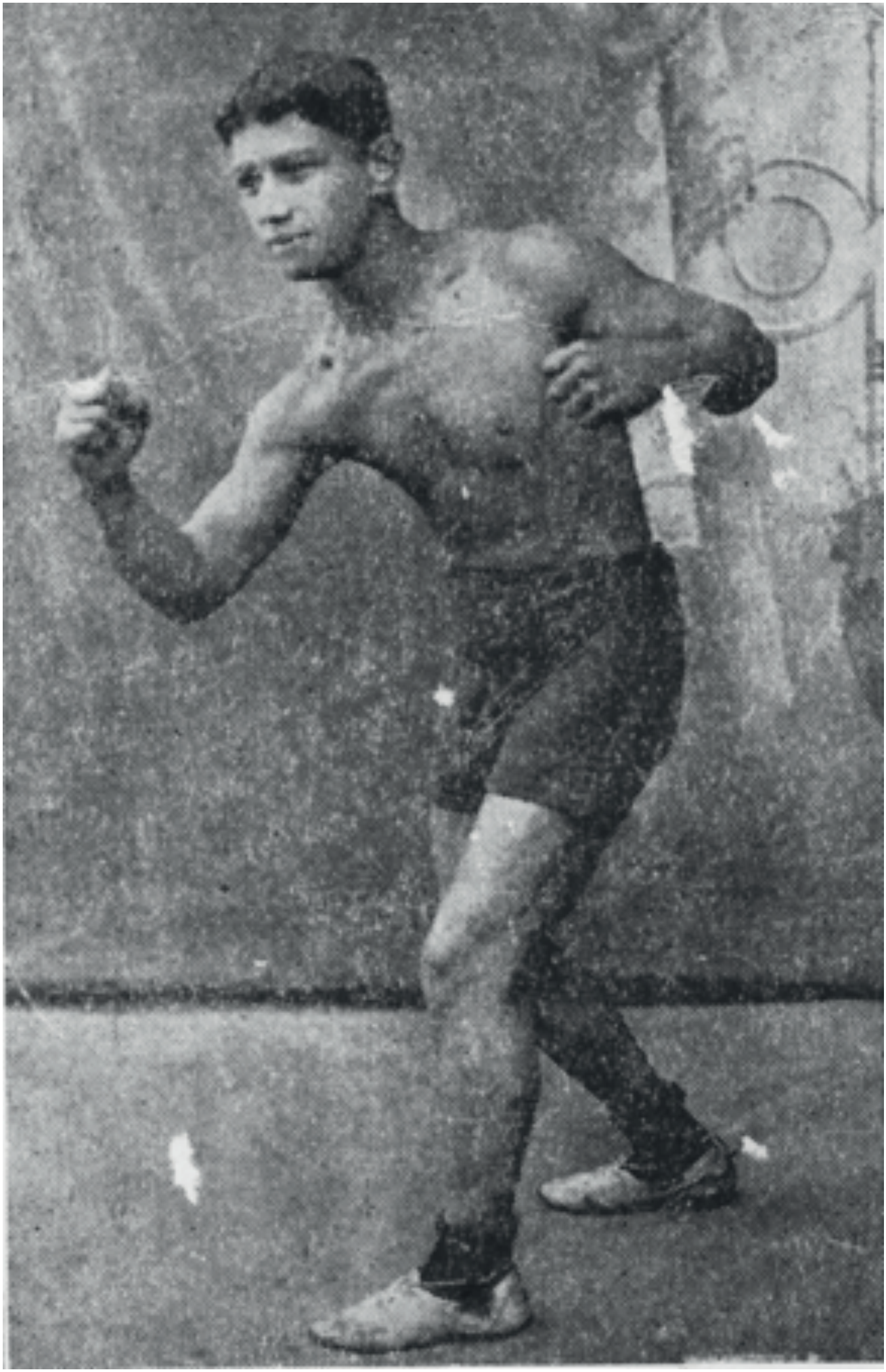
Unknown Boxers





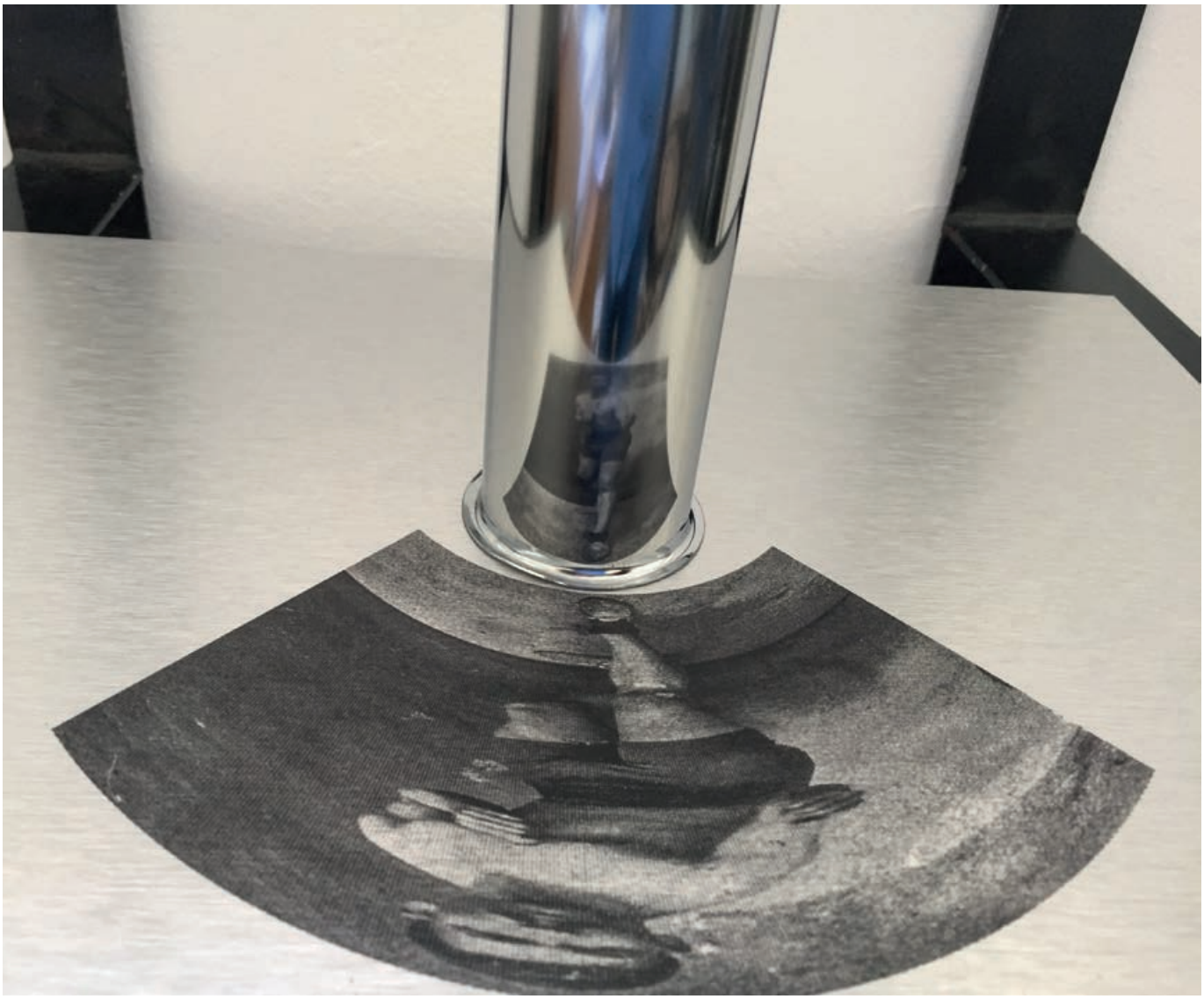


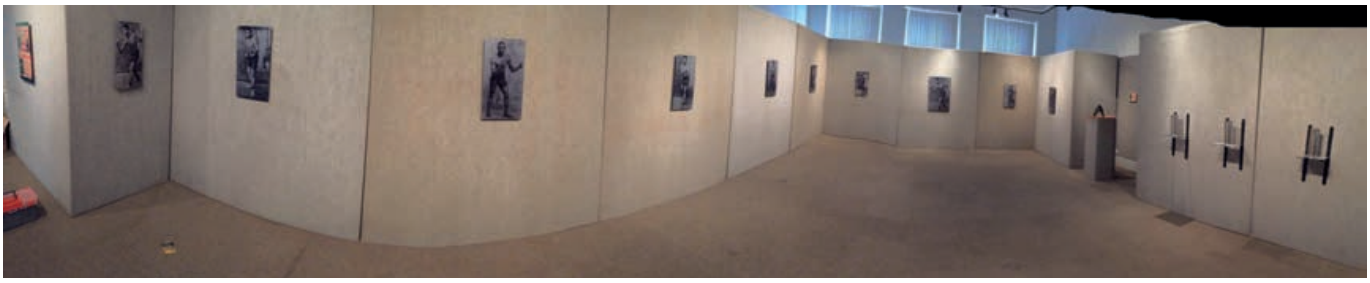


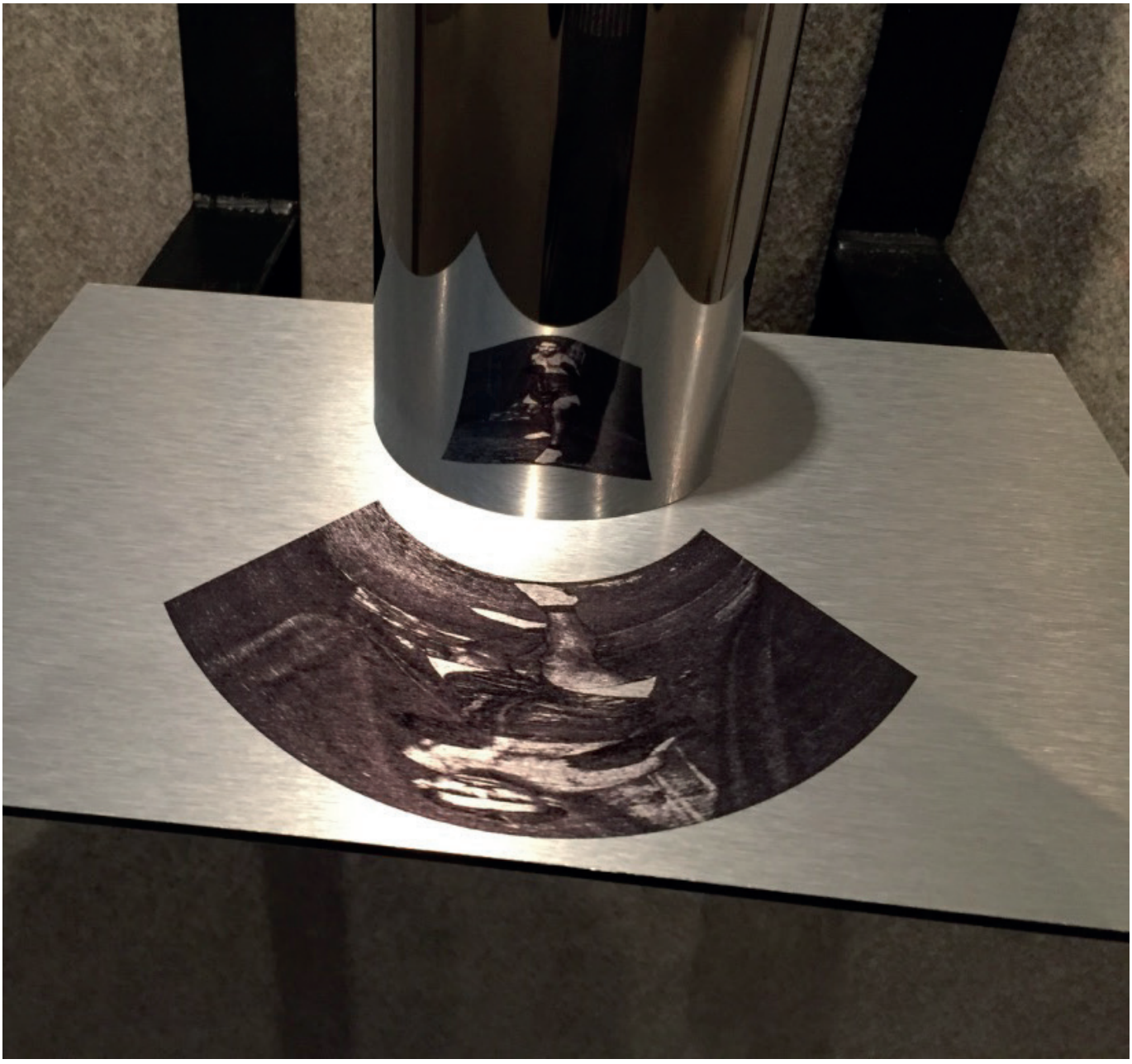


Artworks in situ:

Stellenbosch University Museum
October 2018







Anamorphic Images

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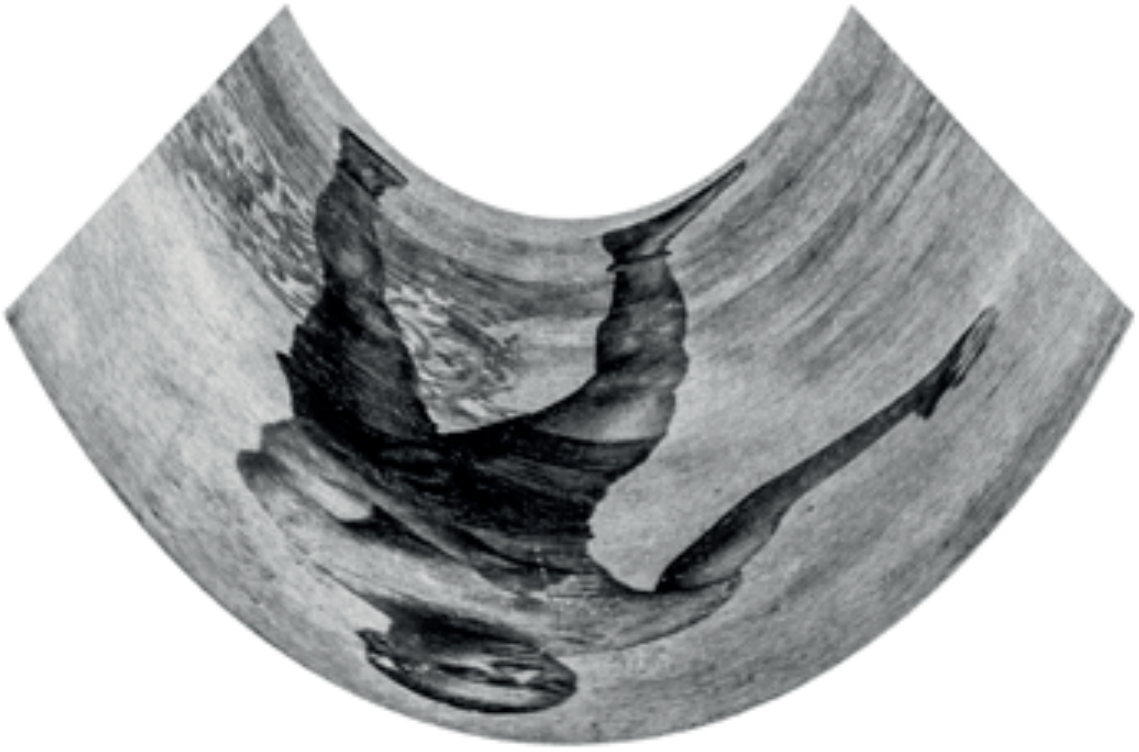
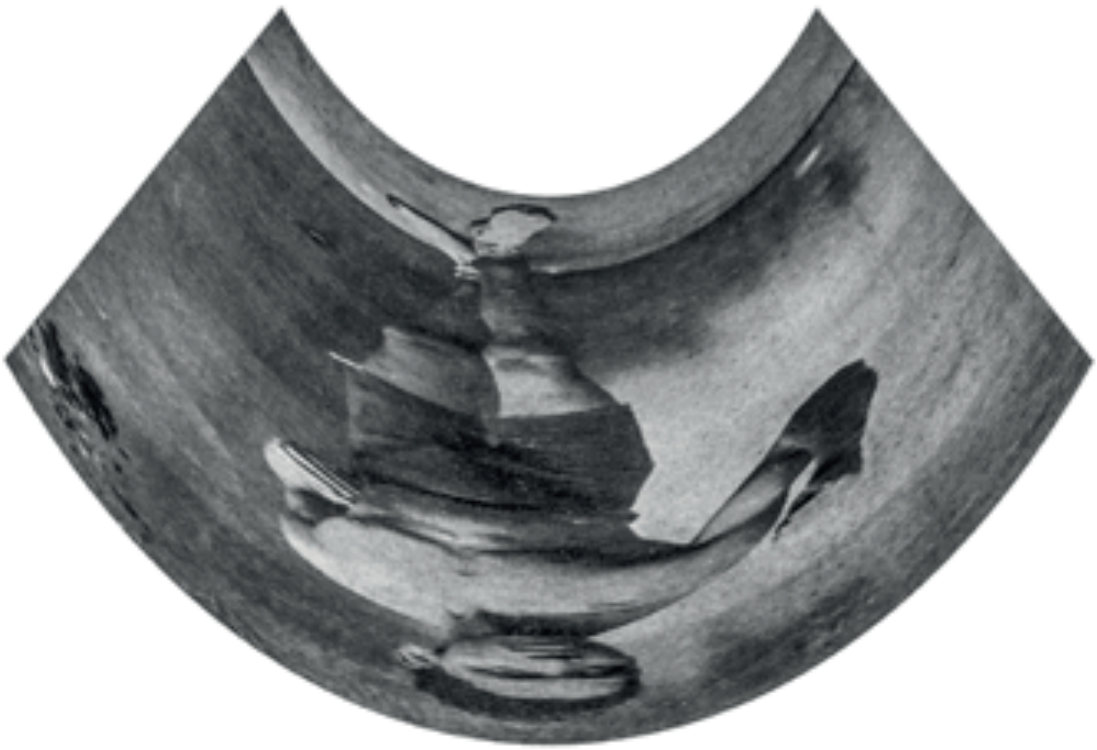
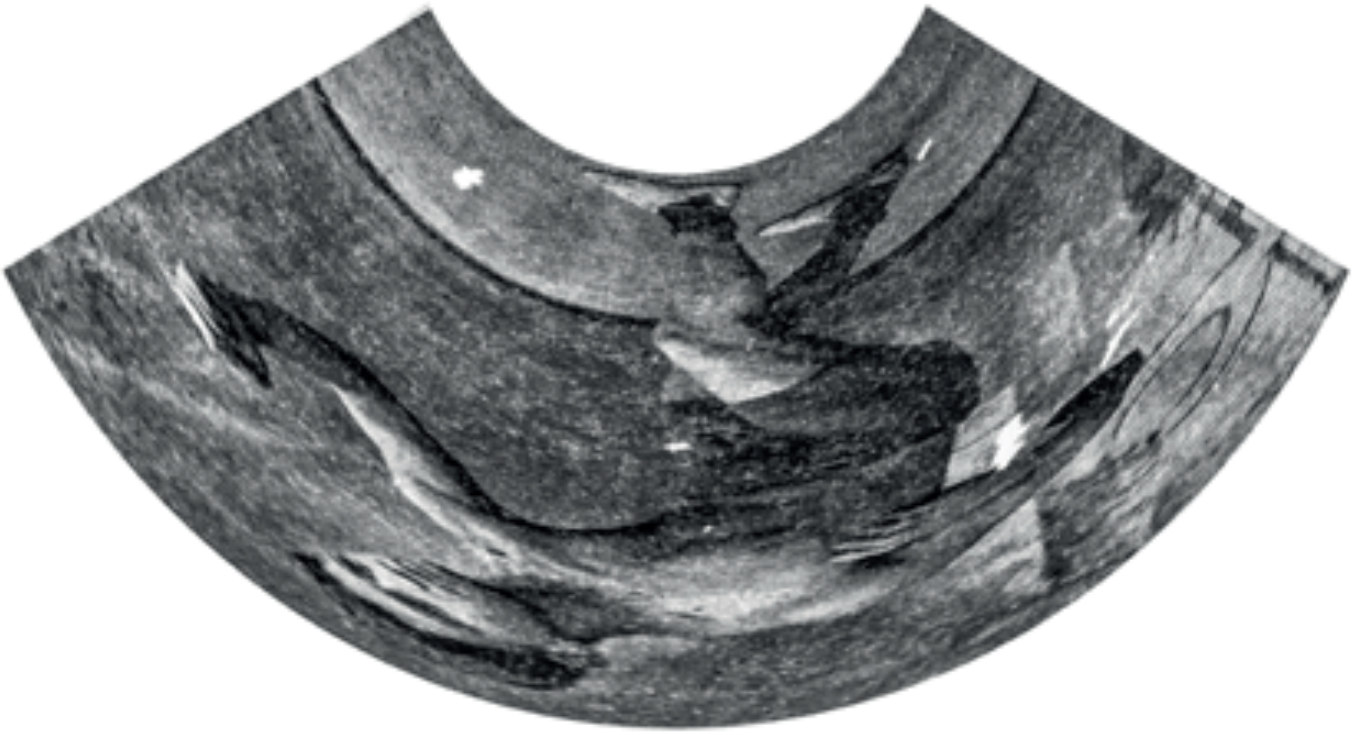
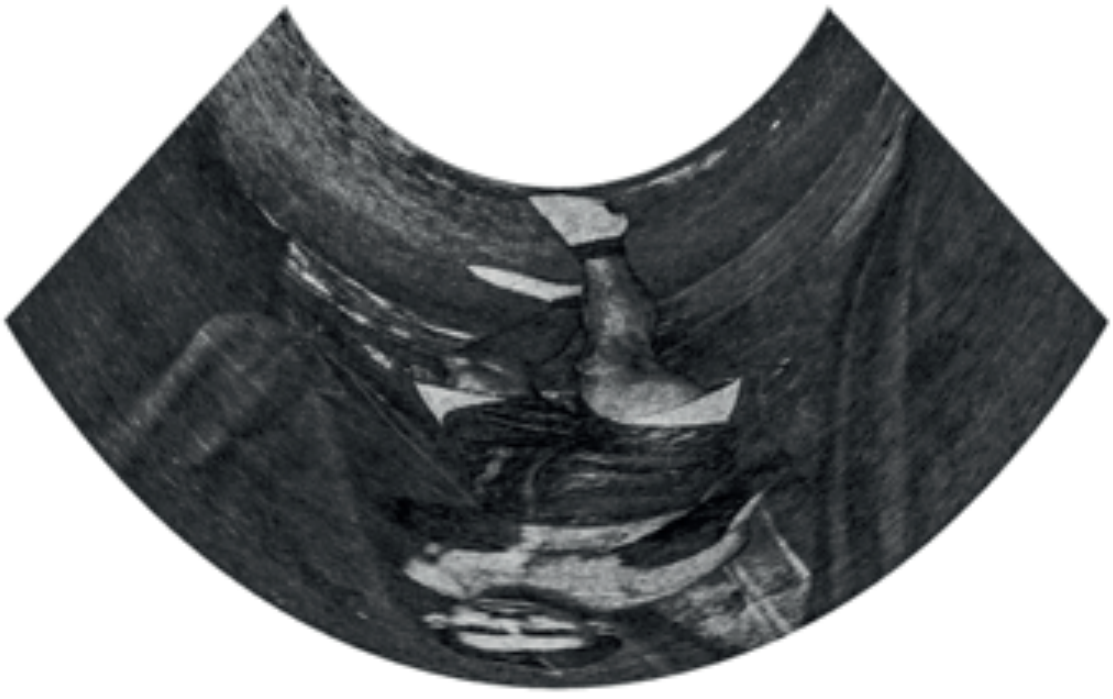
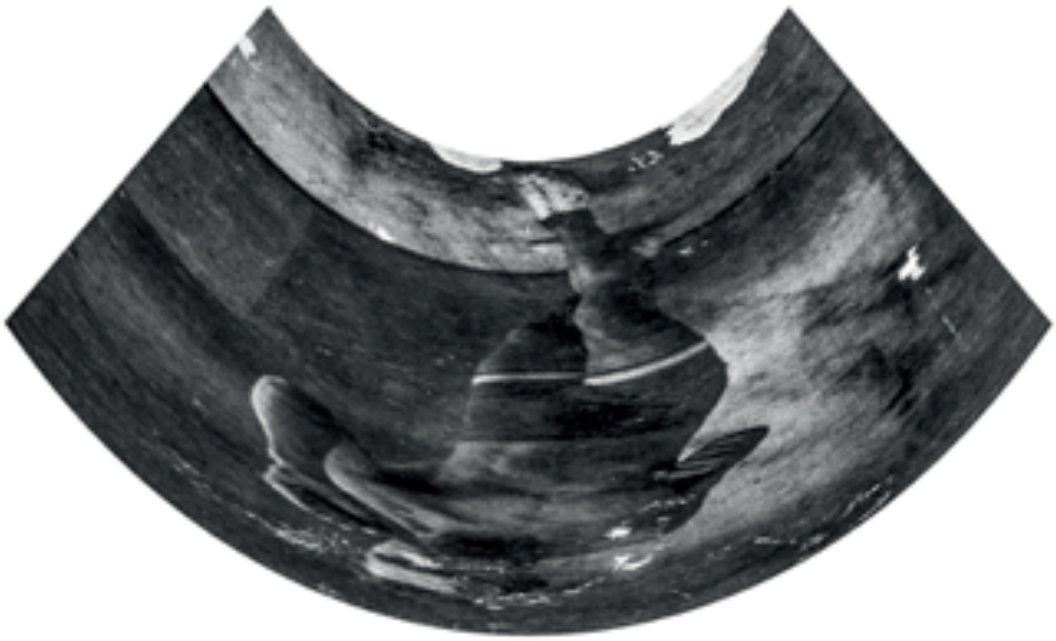
Ensure that the book is placed on an even surface in a well-lit environment for best results.

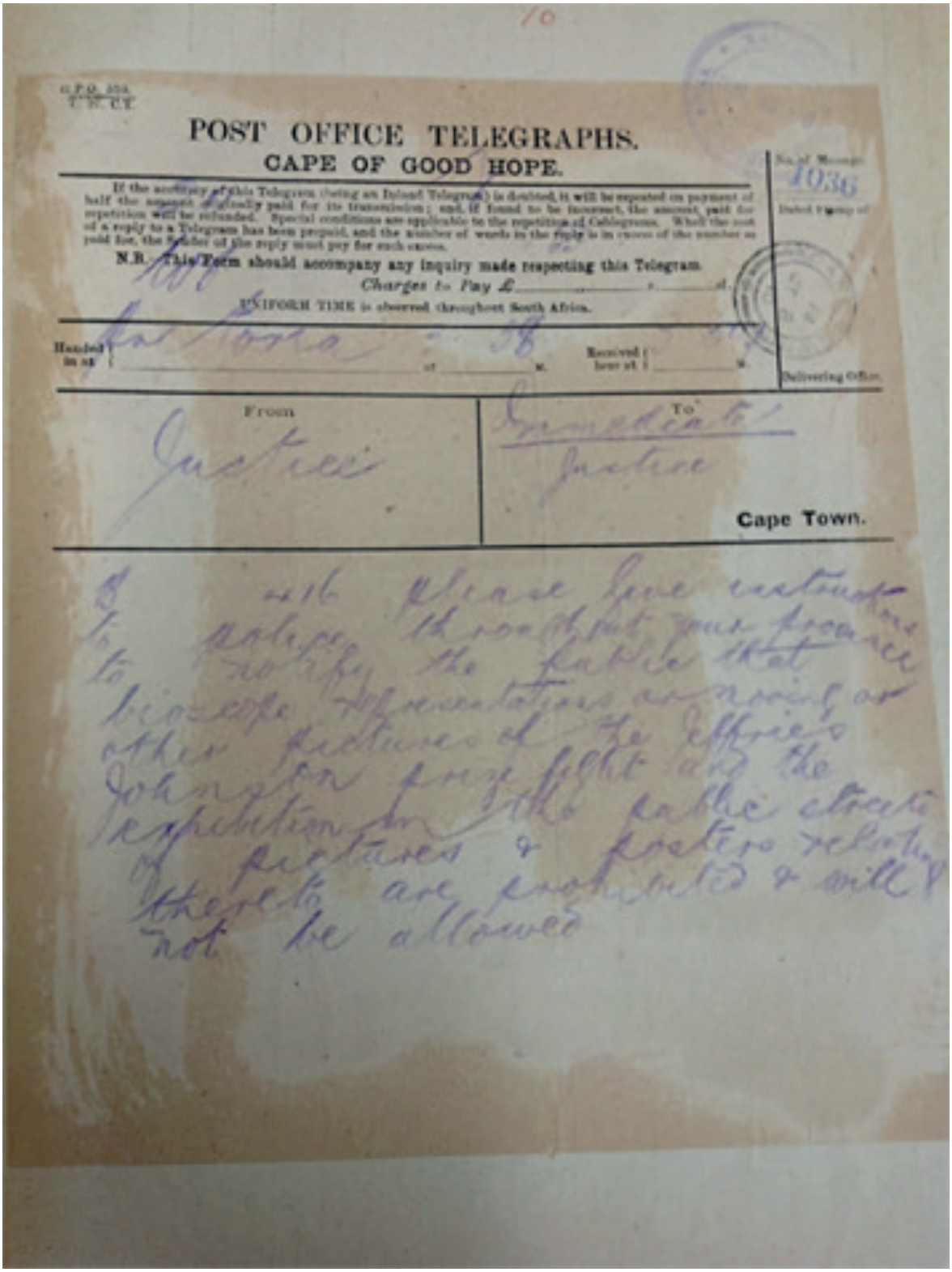












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