

FLOATS LIKE A BUTTERFLY: THE RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE AND THE ART OF COOL¹

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Abstract: This paper discusses the Rumble in the Jungle, as the 1974 boxing world heavyweight championship bout between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire is known in popular culture, in the light of Robert Farris Thompson's analysis of the aesthetic of the cool in African tribal culture/s. It connects various notions of cool to the creation of the spectacle of Ali in the documentary film on the event, When We Were Kings, and proposes a reading of Ali as a sort of culmination of the idea of American cool.

Key words: boxing, Muhammad Ali, cool, identity, When We Were Kings

Me,

We.

- Muhammad Ali

He was Negritude.

- Norman Mailer, on George Foreman

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INTRODUCTION

John Sugden, in *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis*, suggests that boxing can often function as a sanctuary because it has no preeminent cultural linkages to particular social communities, as well as because it is a solo sport that thrives on alienation – the better a boxer gets, the more he or she (though for the purposes of this analysis, it will be 'he' – the pantheon of boxing is still very much masculine, though, hopefully, not for long) is defined in terms of the difference from his/her peers. Ali's 'poem' (delivered to a Harvard senior class) quoted above assumes a different dimension in the light of this analysis. For Muhammad Ali will always be boxing's arch-trickster, turning his fights into political theatre and his genius into showmanship.

Boxing is a sport of paradox – it is alienating but creates communities (of fans, enthusiasts, fellow fighters); it is violent by its very nature (and therefore anarchic also), but it operates within a strict sense of order and a sensitivity to its aesthetic aspirations. This paper explores Muhammad Ali's perpetual tightrope-walking when it comes to performing identities, and the ease with which he negotiates this paradoxical nature of the sport, as an expression of the idea of American cool. Ali converts the loneliness of the professional boxer into a mode of identification with an entire people, a country, and all of humankind in general.

THE RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE AND THE NOTION OF COOL

The Rumble in the Jungle took place on 30th October, 1974, in the May 20 Stadium in Kinshasa, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), between the then Heavyweight Champion of the World, George Foreman, and the former champion, Muhammad Ali. It is a remarkable display of the African-American aesthetic of 'the

cool', and creates a framework within which boxing can be viewed as extending into a dimension of the cool, becoming a palimpsest for the inscription and re-inscription of 'cool' manoeuvres.

“Cool,” notes Robert Farris Thompson, is a “West African/Afro - American metaphor of moral aesthetic accomplishment. The primary metaphorical extension of this term seems to be *control... composure* in the individual context” (Thompson 1973:41). And in *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson point out, “Cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, expression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength and control” (Majors and Billson 1993:4).

Thompson traces the concept of cool semantically across thirty-six African languages, locating it back to a 15th century Benin king who was awarded the name *Ewuare* – “it is cool” – after bringing peace to a region torn by internecine warfare. Cool is “the mask of mind itself,” writes Thompson (1973:41), and quotes Warren D’Azevedo’s ‘The Artist Archetype in Gola Culture’ – to be cool, “it is particularly admirable to do difficult tasks with an air of ease and silent disdain” (ibid). This last theorization intersects with Muhammad Ali’s chronically parodic versification before and after (and, who knows, perhaps even during?) fights. Before his first match with Sonny Liston, for instance, he recited the following lines (accompanied by Liberace on the piano) –

The fistic world was dull and weary
 With a champ like Liston, things had to be dreary.
 Then someone with colour, someone with dash -
 Now fight fans are runnin' with cash!
 This brash young boxer is something to see
 And the heavyweight championship is his destiny.

This kid fights great, he's got speed and endurance,
But if you decide to fight him, increase your insurance.³

While this is not exactly silence – and the Lip, as he was called, was never silent – it does express an air of characteristic ease and disdain for his opponent. Indeed, Ali's performances were always an outcome of his donning the mask of cool, changing his behavior to constantly subvert expectations. He was a beautiful face in a sport that thrives on destroying beauty, and beauty is an essential aim of cool.

COOL TRICKSTERS

“The main playground for tricksters is language,” notes John Leland (2004:166) in his account of the American idea of ‘hip.’ Yoruba culture contains the figure of Esu-Elegbara, the trickster god. Much like that Greek trickster god, Hermes, Esu brings to humankind a way of communication with the gods, and his attributes are many, from individuality, satire and parody to betrayal and loyalty, and encasement and rupture, the very qualities Ali exhibits in the events leading up to and including the Rumble in the Jungle. And Ali's play within the permutations of language is a metaphorical extension of his play in the ring, that genius for technical subversion that made him one of the greatest boxers to have drawn breath. He is the African-American equivalent of Esu, the Signifying Monkey.

The Black concept of *signifying* relates to the use of allusion, parody, misdirection and code to make one word convey a multiplicity of meanings. The Signifying Monkey “does his battle openly [usually in opposition to the Lion], and never misses the opportunity to mock his victims” (LeLand 2004:169). Note Ali's couplet mocking Liston –

³ Transcribed by author from *The Jack Paar Show*. Perfs. Jack Paar, Liberace, Cassius Clay. NBC, 1963. 0:27-0:51, In <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpfzdupLHaE>.

The crowd did not dream when they laid down their money
That they would see a total eclipse of the Sonny.⁴

Ali's use of language, like his dancing in the ring and his use of the most unconventional ring strategies, is a calculated exercise of a system of control and chaos. His knowledge of his own self is prodigious, as is his intuitive ability. His poetry, like his fighting, is pure performance. And cool is nothing if not self-conscious; an implicit, and intricate, knowledge of self is required to negotiate the dark alleyways of cool. Cool, in its practice, and in Foucauldian terms, is an imposition of the ethics of the self onto another's self, thereby gradually and subliminally moulding the other's behavior. Cool is, therefore, an expression that always plays itself out in relation to an alternative framework of expression or practice. Ali's reclamation of the alienation of boxing into a framework of community occurs through a mask of wit and respect as opposed to his linguistic and pugilistic decimation of opponents, as evidenced in Leon Gast's Academy Award-winning documentary *When We Were Kings*. He keeps identifying himself with the ancientness of Africa (recalling Thompson's formulation of "black cool as antiquity"⁵), calling Zaire his own country, as it could easily be, judging by the deafening chants of "Ali bumaye" ("Ali, kill him") from the natives – interestingly, though, it is always Ali himself who seems to calculatedly rouse the spectators into a frenzy of chanting. In fact, the entire event is a symbolic return to the roots, with both Ali and Foreman claiming a Black cultural capital by attempting to become (in Ali's case) or remain (in Foreman's) the *world* heavyweight champion in the heart of Africa. In this context, it is also interesting to

⁴ Transcribed by author from Leon Gast, dir., *When We Were Kings* (Hollywood, CA: Universal Studios), 1996. All further quotes from *When We Were Kings* have been transcribed by the author.

⁵ Thompson, Robert Farris. 'An Aesthetic of the Cool,' *African Arts*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Autumn, 1973: 67.

note that the pre-match musical performances which have now gone down in music history as the 'Black Woodstock' festival – and this is the only existing footage of the show – were intricately woven around the fight, an idea that further concretizes the Rumble as a significant articulation of an independent African-American consciousness.

Ali's constant refusal to conform in the ring is an acute expression of cool – of his controversial phantom punch that knocked Liston out in their rematch and had people crying “fix”, he says, “I call it the anchor punch. And people couldn't see it, it was so fast. *Sports Illustrated* clocked it...and the punch flew at four- one-hundredths of a second. That's like an eye-blink. Now, the minute I hit Sonny Liston, all those people blinked at that moment. That's why they didn't see that punch.”⁶ This creation of a wall of wit around himself achieves the dual purpose of aloofness, an essential expression of cool, and mythmaking, which is the trickster's eternal game of language. In a press conference before the Rumble, he begins in all seriousness to talk about his rigorous training, and then degenerates into absurd humor and improvisational poetry –

I've done something new for this fight.
I've rassled with a alligator. That's right.
I've rassled with a alligator
And I've tussled with a whale
I've handcuffed lightning
Thrown thunder in jail.⁷

And, in an ultimate expression of self-reflexive irony that is cooler than most things cool, he says of George Foreman, “He talks too much!”⁸

⁶ When We Were Kings. Film. Directed by Leon Gast. Hollywood, CA: Universal Studios, 1996.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Paradoxically, it is Foreman who should occupy the central position of the boxer as an expression of cool in this analysis. He is silent and strong, almost “like a physical guru”, the essence of Negritude, as Norman Mailer describes him, and there is about him an air of unwavering confidence. Yet, his attempts at inventing himself as the heroic figure are constantly thwarted, and appear self-absorbed; he takes himself far too seriously, especially in contrast to Ali's wily mockery.

Ali's verbal badinage is emblematic of the Signifying Monkey's loud taunting of the silent Lion of Yoruba lore that Foreman seems to become a symbol for. Ali understands the position of the media as an intermediary between the boxers and public sentiment, and he realizes it is to his advantage to manipulate them into creating his Congolese image. He is far more savvy to the inner workings of the power of the spectacle than Foreman is when it comes to launching and sustaining psychological warfare.

“The spectacle,” says Guy Debord, “presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification.”(2005:7) It is more than a collection of images, being rather “a social relation between people mediated by images”(ibid) Ali, the equivalent of Esu-Elegbara, is certainly 'hip' to this condition of postmodernity – while Foreman tries to memorize a few stock French phrases en route to Zaire, Ali says instead, “They [the pilots and crew] speak English, French and African. We can't even speak English good.” The former thus attempts to negotiate the event of his arrival on terms that are not his own, while Ali accepts his limitations and shrugs them off with a joke. And his quaint attempt at ingratiating himself with the Congolese fans - “Africa is the cradle of civilization. Everybody's home is Africa.” – is an overexaggerated piece of rhetoric that has nothing of the immediacy and sincerity that Ali's shout of “I was a slave 400 years ago and I'm going back home to fight among my brothers, yeah!” possesses. Foreman wants people to

chant, “George Foreman loves Africa”; the seriousness with which he treats the chant of *bumaye* expresses an inability to mock himself or his opponent. Ali, on the other hand, stirs the crowds up into chants of “Ali bumaye” with a perpetual parodic smile on his face, as if he knows exactly how this mockery operates, and how best to feed off it. Indeed, at the beginning of the second round, after being punished for three minutes, he turns to the crowd and motions for them to begin – the chant takes on an almost incantatory quality, and results in a clear identification of Ali as the underdog, the monkey against Foreman's lion.

BOXING AND ALL THAT JAZZ

Ali's systematic reversal of audience (and adversarial) expectation is just that – systematic, *cold*, yet carrying with it the improvisatory quality of the art form that first leads to the notion of an American cool, jazz. In 1949, the British-born/New York-resident pianist George Shearing's highly melodic take on bebop with his unique-sounding quintet was hailed by both Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie as “the greatest thing to happen to bop in [that] year” (Carr 2006:4). This was followed by Miles Davis's seminal *Birth of the Cool*, an album that changed the course of modern music. Cool jazz emphasized a restrained, laid-back, solo style, mixing lyrical precision with improvisational complexity, in the same vein as Ali's sudden and unexpected use of the right hand lead in the first round of the fight. A right hand lead is a right hand punch thrown like a jab, but coming from a right-hander, therefore, the arm has to travel that one-inch more. “Professionals will rarely use a right hand lead because it's a terribly dangerous punch to throw...and fighters, since they work in milliseconds, can see a right coming much faster than a [left] jab. It's a great insult to a top professional to throw a right hand lead at him, because it suggests he's slow enough that you can hit him with it.”⁹

⁹ Norman Mailer, commenting on the fight in *When We Were Kings*.

THE SIGNIFYING MONKEY vs. THE SILENT LION

Ali, in that first round, unleashes not one, not two, but twelve right hand leads, and “Foreman goes crazy”, observes Mailer wryly.¹⁰ The Signifying Monkey taunts the Silent Lion till the latter, significantly, loses his cool. This is when Ali changes his game once again, something only the greatest artists are capable of – Miles Davis, at a banquet at the White House, remarked casually to an astonished white guest who had never heard of him, “I’ve changed music five or six times”(quoted in Leland 2004:180)– “Foreman, like everyone else, had assumed Ali would dance. So Ali went to the ropes.”¹¹ Ali plays on this assumption and uses it to his advantage and launches into his now-famous rope-a-dope technique, leaning very far back on the ropes, thereby conserving energy and allowing Foreman to strike him repeatedly in the hope of making the latter tire and weakening him for an eventual counter-attack, which comes, successfully, in the eighth round. Ali’s complete denial of external expectations, with a calculated precision that necessarily demands a great deal of composure, is his trump card. And his perfect balance of weight, mostly on the ropes, often on Foreman’s body, coincides very literally with Thompson’s notion of coolness as being connected to some kind of “transcendental balance”. Indeed, Ali seems to be hovering in the air for a few seconds every time he leans back on the ropes, his body perfectly relaxed, and his arms protecting him from Foreman’s powerful blows and thereby investing his profile with classical symmetry. He also persists in talking to Foreman throughout his rope-a-dope routine, taunting him by invoking the great tradition of heavyweight boxing – “they told me you could punch as hard as Joe Louis!” – his cool in direct contrast with the mounting rage of George Foreman.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mailer, in *When We Were Kings*.

THE COOL POSE

This brings us to the paradoxical formations of the self that Foreman and Ali achieve. The latter seems to represent the plight of the black man and 'Africanness', while George Foreman is associated (absurd as it might seem) with the white American establishment (Jacobs 2007:153-157). In spite of Mailer's proclamation about Foreman embodying the essence of Negritude, it is Ali (who has lighter skin than Foreman, incidentally) who is the crowd favourite. Seemingly, Ali's performative play of "pride, strength and control" exhibits his status as the figuration of cool in the eyes of the Congolese people. And indeed, Ali's actions throughout the events leading up to the fight and even during it are nothing if not sheer performance, lyrical, rabble-rousing, affecting and effected by everything Majors and Billson talk about as being essential to cool – "behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, expression management."

There is this component of cool, therefore, that seeks involvement with, even as cool establishes detachment from, the alternative mode of practice it functions in relation to. Ali's cocky detachment from the rules of engagement, i.e., by virtue of the rope-a-dope, are thus complicated by his engaging (both outside the ring and inside) with those who he seems to sincerely believe are his people.

ALI AS AMERICAN COOL

Eventually, Ali belongs to this same tradition he uses to his advantage. He is the logical culmination of the line of the cool boxer, from the great "Bad Nigger," Jack Johnson, to the man acknowledged by most as the greatest boxer (pound for pound) to have ever lived, Sugar Ray Robinson. Gerald Early, in 'Mike's Brilliant Career: Mike Tyson and the riddle of black cool', calls Robinson "the epitome of cool, the single greatest influence on jazz trumpeter Miles Davis – who made cool an art form of precision, economy of expression, and

taste" (Early 1996:57). Indeed, Davis once said of Robinson, "Ray was *cold*¹² and he was the best and he was everything I wanted to be in 1954." However, "Robinson's cool was too apathetic...but it was this political detachment that gave Robinson's demeanor its power and its endurance.... In the late 1960s, Muhammad Ali thought of himself as a reinvention and a revision of Robinson, a heavyweight *and*¹³ a politically engaged black man" (ibid).

The modern notion of American cool, therefore, can be traced back to certain cultural elements of tribal Africa, through the figure of Muhammad Ali. Ali brings together differing motifs and constructions of cool that are prevalent in different African tribes. The Gola notion of cool – "the ability to be nonchalant at the right moment" – is brought into dialogue with the Yoruban trickster god Esu, which further interacts with the "cool tongue" of Kikuyu sentiment (quoted in Thompson 1973:41), therefore, in the Ali's cool po(i)se in Kinshasa, both during the fight and in the build-up to it. The disparate yet connected significations of African cool intersect in Ali's sensibility and body as a new, American cool. "Coolness imparts order...by means of ecstatic unions of sensuous pleasure and moral responsibility," notes Thompson (1973:42). Ali's pleasure in the sensuous, amply demonstrated in the ring, both in his graceful agility (the dynamic) and his rope-a-dope tactic of classical stillness (the static), combines with his outspokenness in support of the African identity to construct him as the great figure of cool perfection in American popular culture. The boxer formerly known as Cassius Clay framed the sweet science of bruising within an identifiable, and identifiably American, aesthetic of cool that will endure as long as he is remembered.

¹² *italics mine*

¹³ *italics mine*

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