

NORMAN MAILER ON
MUHAMMAD ALI:
BOXING AS NONVERBAL DIALOGUE
AND THE DISCOURSE AND
BANTU PHILOSOPHY

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A boxing-match is a story which is constructed before the eyes
of the spectator . . .

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (16)

Every boxing match incarnates the whole of boxing as an incar-
nation of all fundamental violence.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critic of Dialectical Reason II* (27)

BOXING AS NONVERBAL DIALOGIC DISCOURSE

In what follows, I shall offer an analysis of Norman Mailer's concise description of boxing as "dialogue between two bodies" (*On the Fight of the Century* 19). This dialogic concept of boxing emerges from the depth of Mailer's highly reflective essay, *On the Fight of the Century*, on the Muhammad Ali-George Frazier fight, which occurred on March 8, 1971 at Madison Square Garden. I shall put forward the notion that Mailer's concept of boxing as dialogue, as minimally and simply as he puts it, is not a matter of wading in the shallows. For me, quite the opposite is true. Mailer's conceptual formulation offers us the tip of the iceberg of a prodigious phenomenolog-

ical description of boxing as an immediate expression of a complex of immediate experiences. As such, it has far-reaching consequences.

Mailer *sees* the hidden depth of boxing as nonverbal dialogue, *sees through* it, and theoretically sees it through. His understanding of boxing is an unmediated act of seeing the twin verbal and nonverbal modes of language as coevolutionary. Together they constitute the basis of human mind-body ontology. As a man of the language arts, Mailer comprehends that each boxing event particularizes a nonverbal, all be it instinctual violent primal dialogue between two pugilists. Such an event inevitably produces a signifying nonverbal narrative discourse of its own. Within it opens up a considerable clearing for nonverbal narratives in the art of dance and sports with their attendant new worlds of meaning. As such, it helped Mailer to assess the psychological depth of Muhammad Ali's body ego as black Heavyweight Champion and its significance to 20th century culture in the U. S. and around the world.

Similarly, the reader too gets a hold of Mailer's condensed conceptualization of boxing as an act of cognitive *seizing*, as it were, as a nonverbal dialogic Agon. Thus, Mailer offers an intuitive new paradigm in thinking about watching, thinking, reading, or writing about boxing. By extension, it would follow then that boxing spectators too at once visually receive the visual nonverbal dialogue generated by boxers. As boxing enthusiasts, they might respond to boxing emotionally or conceptually or a combination of both. Each one of them does so according to their desires, and acuities and intensities of their perceptions. For me, Mailer's formulation of the essence of boxing as *dialogic lived body experiences* of two pugilists shared with spectators is as succinct as it is multilayered. For those interested in boxing as boxers, spectators or scholars of pugilism it will call forth novel nonverbal narrative discourses, which need unpacking, analyzing, and interpreting.

However, I hasten to point out that I equate the two-body dialogue in Mailer's definition of boxing with the concept of *mind-body oneness*, whole and entire. I share this unified mind-body theory with contemporary neuropsychanalysis, which asserts the mind-body oneness to be primordial—safeguarded by evolutionary laws and handed down from one generation to another. Certain still prevalent schools of philosophy and psychology follow ideas about the mind-body dichotomy as conceived by 17th century French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650). Descartes' couches his well-known fundamental concept simply. He states, "I think; therefore, I am" (*Je*

pense, donc je suis). This conceptualization of primacy of the mind remains intact and forceful after centuries. One might safely say it *still* packs a powerful theoretical punch with certain philosophers such as David Chalmers, Thomas Nagel and, I would add, even in the public's domain of thinking. Clearly, Descartes intended to *detotalize* what in our time we vigorously and intentionally perceive as the totality of indissoluble mind-body unity. The Cartesian theory of mind-body dichotomy still beckons to us, but it fails to account for our current neuroscientific and neuropsychanalytic discoveries of inseparability of mind-body wholeness.

THE SUBJECTIVE "I" IN BOXING AS NONVERBAL DIALOGUE

Mailer's description of boxing as dialogue draws from the ability of one individual intentionally addressing another through our body ego as the subjective "I." Thus, the individual as the subjective "I" enters into intersubjective conversations with another fellow human being or toward an object in his or her world of sensory perceptions indispensable ontological discourses emerge. In turn, as the ensemble of such discourses develops they enable individuals as a whole to classify, organize, and integrate perceptions of a shared world. As an unlimited number of individuals, "We" are then spontaneously able to describe such perceptions, because we directly and mutually perceive them and act upon them. For example, it makes it possible for me as the subjective "I" to address the "Not Me" or the "other" as "Thou," atavistically recapturing and enacting an originary "I and Thou" communication, to use philosopher Martin Buber's language.

A similar "I-It" unifying and revelatory intentional dialogue occurs between the individual as the subjective "I, and the world he or she inhabits as "It." Consequently, the original human dialogic activities spread out into a transcendent realm of discoveries, each with its own discourses and inevitable epistemologies. For me, they constitute the indispensable principle of our epistemology, its Tao, as it were. The organizing, categorizing, and essential meaning-making processes of these dialogic acts bring about prodigiously nuanced conceptual, scriptural, and nonverbal human discourses. As a whole, they make up the immense body of knowledge in the humanities, social sciences, and mathematical languages underlying sciences. I would say that all our inquiries in these spheres of acquisition of under-

standing our world are all different modes of the same primary *verbal and nonverbal dialogic narrative discourses*.

Now we have at least a hint of the compelling general reasons that motivated Mailer's theoretical concept of boxing as a dialogue between two bodies. I think that it helpful to place Mailer's theory of boxing as nonverbal dialogue within Martin Buber's and "I and Thou" (*Ich und Du*) context of primal human interactions. Thus, in due time I will examine Mailer's imaginative application of boxing as nonverbal "I and Thou" dialogue and its narrative discourse to Muhammad Ali's art of boxing.

In particular, Mailer focuses on Ali's fights with two other world heavy-weight-boxing champions, Joe Frazier and George Foreman. Consequently, first I shall draw from Mailer's *On the Fight of the Century: King of the Hill* (1971). Second, I offer my observations on his later book *The Fight* (1975) in its relation to Bantu philosophy. *The Fight* is Mailer's lengthy and authoritative meditation on the fight between challenger Muhammad Ali, whom he admired as a friend, and world Heavyweight champion George Foreman. It took place in 1974 in Kinshasa Zaire (now The Democratic Republic of Congo).

A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO BOXING AS "DIALOGUE BETWEEN TWO BODIES"

Searching for an appropriate theoretical method of approach to Mailer's description of praxis of boxing as nonverbal dialogue, I ended up with linguistics. I believe linguistics supplies a suitable and comprehensive theoretical ground to situate the analysis of Mailer's phenomenological description of boxing as nonverbal language. This methodology properly places Mailer's insights on boxing at the crossroads of linguistic and semiotics. I shall specifically use the well-known terminology developed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and the concept of generative grammar put forward by linguist and contemporary theoretician Noam Chomsky in the U.S.

Saussure utilized a triad of interrelated terminologies for phenomena that language universally founds itself as an indispensable human faculty of communication. First, he introduces the French term "*la langue*" (language) as the primordial human ability to converse by symbols and signs. Language surges forth from the plasticity of *transformable and transformative psy-*

chophysical of the brain's muscular structures. Secondly, Saussure designated "*le langage*" as one of the central constituents of the language, which signifies multimodal human capacities. "*Le langage*" makes possible the expression of thoughts, ideas, notions, conceptualization, using the unifying principles of grammatical constructions. Similarly, it puts together a system of lexical, syntactic symbols and signs used verbally or scripturally. Syntax, grammatically arranges a cluster of words as signs or symbols in a sentence. On its semantic level, *le langage* potentially enables us to create endless series of multivocal and thus interpretative activities (hermeneutics).

Le langage subsumes multimodal references to various modalities of language. For example, these lingual modalities include philosophical language, sign language, nonverbal languages, language of flowers, animal language, and so forth. One may say *le langage* closely approaches Chomsky's "generative grammar" or "transformational generative grammar." It produces unrestricted new sentences, each having the potential of as many significations as there are listeners, and readers.

Finally, yet importantly, Saussure designates "*la parole*" (speech) as oral and aural communication. For me, speech makes up the domain without borders of human lived world of communication and meaning-making acts. It gives birth to vast expanses of hermeneutics and immanent ontology. Thus, language establishes the basis of lucidity of our amorphous and quite often improvised human lived experiences and gives a sense of who we are as human beings. In this light, it is not farfetched to state that the intelligibility of every aspect of human life surfaces from the mysterious fullness and depths of language.

LINGUISTICS OF BOXING AS DIALOGUE BETWEEN TWO BODIES

There are languages other than words, and languages of symbol and languages of nature. There are languages of the body. And prizefighting is one of them.

—Norman Mailer, *On the Fight of the Century* (17)

Here, I should point out I shall generally apply Saussure and Chomsky's linguistic theories to Mailer's nonverbal dialogic language of boxing and its consequent narrative discourse. Language as communication between two individuals or groups of individuals shapes up within the folds of adaptability of brain structures. So linguistic structures, patterns and their or-

ganizations are and have been subject evolutionarily processes. Even though inherited, they do remain flexible. They do not constitute at all a received, fixed, and unchanging and unchangeable language psychophysical apparatus. Quite to the contrary, they generate the potential capabilities of unbound psychophysical cognitions and coordination as speech. Thus, “speech acts,” to use John Searle’s terminology, are *freely chosen and intentional acts*. From this indispensable organizing ability of the Broca’s area of the brain, we derive our aptitude to think, to conceptualize, and finally comprehend matters symbolic, abstract, and thus universal.

It is then imperative to keep in mind that the brain is essentially an intricate ensemble of malleable muscles too, including its Broca’s area. The linguistic brain muscle centers are collaborative parts of the indivisible human mind-body continuum. Clearly, the same is true of our vocal cords, placed as they are in the larynx and the muscles of the face, jaws, mouth, lips and so forth. In their entirety, they produce language within which speech is born as dialogue and its resultant discourse, which has the possibility of creating a new world of significations.

On the one hand, the neuro-lingual configurations of the brain synchronously trigger their corresponding facial neuro-muscular constituents to make verbal communication possible. On the other hand, the human musculature in its entirety exhibits the potential of activating a multifaceted system of kinetic signs and symbols to make nonverbal dialogue a parallel reality. Physical gestures, postures, and positions make manifest an enormous nonverbal communicative system and their attendant semiotics. All sports as well as the kinetic arts such as dancing fall in this category of communicative system.

Clearly, Mailer’s idea of nonverbal discourse finds its richest conceptual validity in the lexical, syntactic, and semantic nonverbal dialogic discourse. It approximates an intricate mode of kinesiology of two bodies in boxing. We can say therefore, the intentional mind-body movements in boxing possess their own nonverbal linguistics. My proposed nonverbal linguistics parallels Saussure’s general linguistics and semiology. Jabs, uppercuts, short punches, straight punches, and counterpunches among many others, make up boxing’s lexicography and semiology of their own. They are intentional, controlled, and coordinated movements as nonverbal signifying symbols. Their accumulation makes up the lexical, syntactic and semantics of kine-

siology of boxing as discourse, which gradually progresses toward a layered narrative.

I would add that such narratives concurrently correspond to a spectator's moment-by-moment lived visual, tactile, and to some extent aural perceptions and reactions. For boxing scholars, these narratives as a whole elicit their own modes of what one might largely ascribe to the realms of existential-ontology, aesthetics, psychology, and philosophy. In due course, they comprise a new mind-body epistemology. I do believe Mailer worked hard as a writer toward providing such narratives full of significant disclosures in the *On the Fight of the Century* and *The Fight*. Without his considerable efforts, many such revelations might have remained in the domain of the as-yet-inexpressible.

From this vantage point, Mailer deepens our awareness of boxing as physical dialogue in sentient moments of extreme lived mind-body experiences between two boxers. One might base a whole phenomenology upon it. I should say Mailer largely introduced this field of psycho-philosophical investigation of boxing. In this context, boxers take on an aura of "authenticity" in a series of freely chosen acts, which Jean-Paul Sartre theoretically grants only to "authentic" individuals who choose to act freely and responsibly, becoming fully human in the process. Boxers at will engage in one-on-one combat and take full responsibility for its consequences. From each one of such existential situations issues forth a phenomenological discourse of direct and intentional lived experiences of two bodies in *extremis*. For German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) such a state signified a "limit-situation." On the one hand, the individual has an intuitive "eye-opening" awareness of extremity and the choice of acting bravely and experiencing a rare moment of existential freedom and grace. On the other hand, there is the opposite choice of "fear and trembling unto death," as Søren Kierkegaard put it, and oblivion.

EXCURSUS: BOXING AND DANCE: COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Like a dancer, a boxer "is" his body and is totally identified with it.

—Joyce Carol Oats, *On Boxing* (5)

I am among those who detect commonalities between Mailer's perception and its ensuing theory of boxing as an intentional, active dialogue between

two boxers and the wider historical context of ancient sacral spectacles. The boxing regulations, the spatio-temporal dimensions of the boxing ring, the boxing apparel, and boxing regulations all serve boxers as the dancing stage does for dancers in sacral or artistic and secular dancing. On the stage, dancers engage in mostly nonviolent, well-developed nonverbal narratives of great depth, each with its own semiology, aesthetics, and inevitable hermeneutics. Etymologically, one might properly place the comparison between boxing and dancing within the overall space allotted to ancient spectacles. Boxing and dancing performances unfold within well-delineated guidelines. Among the contemporary examples of affinities between boxing and dancing are the *spectacular* street break dancing and hip hop. They occupy a place on a level reserved for the religious, artistic, and secular dances.

However, there are differences between the arts of dancing and boxing. The dénouement of physical dialogues between pairs of pugilists shapes up as narratives of real existential triumphs and defeats. Consequently, the revelations of such spectacles as lived experiences are far-reaching. Boxing is a spectacle of absorbing interest to many of us, but it is also disturbing as well. Boxers carry out their instinctual, violent, mind-body dialogue within the boundaries of societal constraints imposed upon them by the superego. Yet there remains a residue of a sense uneasiness about the whole enterprise. Thus from the depth of a formalized aggregate of socially sanctioned but physically punishing acts, boxing emerges as the language of undisputed power and temporary domination and defeat, elation and humiliation. Born of mind-body unity, boxing still articulates and dramatizes the dialectical syntheses of contraries in human lived experiences. These dialectical opposites include the consciousness vs. the unconscious; the learned and deliberate vs. the instinctive and the automatic; the legal, and socially permissible vs. the taboo as “fouls” and illegal blows, and so forth.

One might justifiably say that today’s boxing is a post-oedipal *game*, a combat sport with socially sanctioned imposed rules and regulations, which would be nonexistent in pre-oedipal *free play* of childhood—such as, say, all-in, free wrestling, or smack down. In his *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, Donald G. Kyle tells us such brawls are a “A specialized heavy event, the *pankration* or ‘all powerful combat’ was a brutal free-for-all combining wrestling, and boxing, and kicking. A match ended only when one athlete capitulated or was incapacitated” (125).

In its ritual, moral, religious, nonverbal performance dancing remains an artistic performance. Various modes of dancing arts remain significant sociocultural, nonverbal events and have their own well-demarcated performative guidelines. Therefore, from the perspective of nonverbal performances, boxing approximates approaches to the art of the dance. As in boxing, all forms of the art of dance make manifest a kinetic system of nonverbal communication. This system is at work from classical ballet to acrobatics of street dances such as hip hop, with its assemblage of improvised gestural movements. This kinship between boxing and dancing is of theoretical and practical significance. From my perspective, it even bridges the gap between the popular and the classical modes of dancing in a production such as adapting Tchaikovsky's score of the *Nutcracker Suite* to hip hop. In its fusion of the classical ballet with its flowing kinetics and vernacular acrobatics, the *Hip Hop Nutcracker* goes remarkably far to illustrate with efficacy Mailer's concept of boxing as a dialogic enterprise. Altogether, the art of boxing and dancing provide spectators with dramatic nonverbal narratives of life's triumphs and defeats, joys and sorrows.

HEURISTICS AND HERMENEUTICS OF BOXING AS ART AND SCIENCE

Some may disagree, but in my father's world, boxing is truly one of the arts.

Norman Mailer and John Buffalo Mailer,
The Big Empty (173)

Ali himself conceded that Liston's brutality was scientific.

Springs Toledo, *The Gods of War* (63)

Mailer asserts that in boxing two bodies "address one another in a set of conversational exchanges which go deep into the heart of each other's matter. It is just that they converse with their physiques" (*On the Fight of the Century* 19). Conducted with optimal skill and ruthlessness, their conversation indeed goes to *the heart of the matter*: the essence of the other's psyche. In their ferocious struggle for total dominance, through psychophysical power, they force each other to face the *crux* of their life, in the etymological meaning of "crux" as "cross" and the suffering it inflicts. So much of what the boxers discover in their mind body dialogue against one another is until then tucked away in the unconscious part of their body ego. Within the spa-

tiotemporal enclosure of the boxing ring's exigencies, boxers become more receptive to unconscious hints. Their body ego becomes once again coextensive with one another as it once was with the body of the mother of infancy—or so I think.

In the heat of battle, these unconscious intimations divulge to boxers a horizon of the “unsought known,” to use psychoanalyst Christophe Bollas’s terminology. For boxers, these hints of the unsought and unsought known are private repressed childhood thoughts that bubble up into in their minds in public. Paradoxically, they are at once limited and boundless, depressing and ecstatic, as are all the revelations of the repressed. I would like to reiterate that it is reasonable to say the silent, touch-and-feel of nonverbal dialogue between the mother of infancy and the child find their resurgence in highly intricate, personal ways in boxers. Indeed, one may say it is so with all athletes engaged in one-on-one competitions, as it happens in a successful psychanalytic session.

From Mailer’s viewpoint boxing is then a subjective, direct, intuitively intentional, public journey into the mysterious country of a mode of mind-body nonverbal art. Such a voyage is replete with its attendant philosophy and psychology of “unthought known” and as-yet-unknown for whoever undertakes it. Mailer tells us, “Serious boxing is always a study in character and discipline of a very rare sort and this demand is most dramatized at the heavyweight level” (*The Big Empty* 176). When Mailer applies this theoretical insight to the specific case of Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier fight (1971), the outcome is illuminating and instructive. With his usual challenging flair and vigor in matters intellectual and corporeal, Mailer writes:

Yet to begin to talk about Ali and Frazier, their psyches, their styles, their honor, their character, their greatness, and their flaws, we have to recognize that there is no way to comprehend them as men like ourselves—we can only guess at their insides by a real jump of our imagination into the science Ali invented—he was the first psychologist of the body. (*On the Fight of the Century* 21–22)

In the above passage, Mailer gives us a glimpse of the psychophysical and ethical dimensions of great heavyweight boxers such as Ali and Frazier. Yet it carries a warning against a too-easy comprehension of character of such

boxers. They experience their inner world firsthand as an unmediated, personal lived experience in *extremis*, which is manifestly *ineffable* to those who have not been through it. Only one's imagination can give a clue to its indescribable existence as the most authentic ontological moment in one's life.

According to Mailer, the boxers' dialogue, particularly in a heavyweight championship fight, allows boxers to grasp enigmas and ambiguities of their inner world ordinarily not available to others and often to themselves. Boxers can only indirectly communicate such inscrutabilities to the spectators. For the experience of an imaginative mind-body leap into the unknown and the "unsought known" is not easily communicable. In trading signifying blows with one another, the psychology of boxers such as Ali and Frazier opens up to much more than trips to a psychoanalyst might do. One may think of the psychology of boxers as psyche + logos (logic of inner thoughts). Their mind-body dialogue contains much that remains to others undecipherable or esoteric. It persists as an ensemble of unsharable secrets, because they are *unutterable* and beyond the reach for the non-practitioners. That is the reason only an imaginative writer of creative fiction as well as an intellectual such as Mailer can experience it as a distinct narrative, somewhere between the realms of the literal and the literary. For Mailer, Ali's reported statement, "Liston's brutality was scientific" can only be meaningful in that ambient imaginal light that Mailer knew so well.

However, I would suspect that Mailer, as an amateur boxer, would have given us a more enlightening interpretation of Ali's remark. Perhaps he might have advanced and expanded on the specific concept of the art and science of dialogical boxing. After all, British sportswriter Pierce Egan in the early 1800s referred to boxing as "sweet science," possibly using the adjective "sweet" as an intensifier or embellishment. I am inclined to think that Mailer would have justifiably told us boxers as courageous individuals voluntarily go through experiences that radically differentiate their comprehension of the human condition from the rest of us non-pugilists. In epiphanic experiential moments, boxers open up prospects of what one could call *piercing perceptions*. On this plane of existential clues, they can objectively test the efficacy of their own and their revelation opponents' performances. They end up with a method of experientially well-differentiated comprehension of who they are by what they do properly in *extremis*.

Psychosomatically attuned to one another as they are in their one-on-one combat, boxers reciprocally act out narratives full of unexpected un-

earthing of unconscious motives, moments of working through and clearing psychic blockages. The result is greater self-awareness and expansion of the boxer's body ego. Additionally, placed as they are within potentially life and death struggles, they clearly access hidden suggestions of their instinctual violence and properly deal with it within socio-ethical boundaries imposed upon them through arduous training. Such instinctual encounters unveil aspects of union of our life and death instincts. They often have an innate tendency to engage disturbing psychophysical syntheses of life and death instincts. Mailer was clearly aware of all the intricacies of such mysterious syntheses.

As we presently shall see, Mailer discerned Ali's acute keenness of psychological insight as a boxer made him "the first psychologist of the body." In the light of Mailer's appreciation of Wilhelm Reich's psychoanalytic studies of the body ego, I speculate he would not have minded if we would call Ali "*the first psychologist of body-ego*." The theoretical implications of the Freudian theory of body-ego in ego psychology are directly applicable to Mailer's designation of boxing as dialogue between two bodies. It is crucial to Mailer's understanding of the Ali phenomenon in boxing history.

MAILER ON BODY EGO NARRATIVE

The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface.

Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (16)

As I have already discussed at some length, nonverbal dialogue, just like the verbal dialogue, always and everywhere, results in a discourse that is principally narrative. In boxing, this narrative has two main characters; it generates its plot in accumulation of punches exchanged within boxing regulations, and accordingly configures its thematic concerns. In various styles and degrees of intensities, nonverbal dialogic narrative discourse dramatizes and enhances our perception of our human condition. For that reason, such narrative discourses inevitably delineate and articulate the limits of our knowledge and the possibility of surpassing them.

Mailer's conceptualization of boxing as nonverbal dialogue partakes of the same logic. He discovers boxing yields narratives of lived body ego experiences under utmost challenging psychophysical situations. With his interest in existential psychology, this yield is of considerable psychosocial

import for Mailer. It is of great interest to him that the embattled body ego finds its balance stretched to its farthest reaches by radical situational challenges in boxing. The body ego struggles to keep itself intact—torn as it is between conflictive demands of the tripartite Freudian structural dimensions of the psyche: id, super-ego, and ego. The id represents the irrepressible psychic domain of unconscious as infantile needs seeking immediate satisfaction, which the infant often has to repress under unsurmountable parental powers. The super-ego represents the internalized socio-ethical and religious imperatives, which mostly join the unconscious. Reconciling dialectical demands on the body ego makes for a sense of constant tension and anxiety. It is understandable then that accumulating tensions in boxers' body ego is immense. Impending dialectics of triumph and defeat; honor and humiliation; passion and pain, life and possible death drastically threaten the sense of oneself as "I," and its corporeal boundaries. The pull of antithetical emotions make boxers' body ego fraught with a sense of inevitable existential dread (*Angst*). As Mailer tells us,

So, two great fighters in a great fight travel down subterranean rivers of exhaustion and cross mountain peaks of agony, stare at the light of their own death in the eye of the man they are fighting, travel into the crossroads of the most excruciating choice of karma as they get up from the floor against all the appeal of the sweet swooning catacombs of oblivion it is just that we do not see them this way, because they are not primarily men of words, and this is the century of words, numbers, and symbols. (*On the Fight of the Century* 17)

Just the same, there is still more. Performing, of necessity in open view of the public, such private dialogical boxing narratives make them much more stressful for boxers. Possible disgrace and grievous injuries for boxers in public view are also always and inevitably unsettling for them. This difficult private and public dialogical narrative discourses grounds themselves in boxers' body ego and profoundly transforms its balance.

In this regard, boxers turn out to be genuine public performers and storytellers. They unveil deeply personal stories to strangers. As a writer of fiction, Mailer must have known this phenomenon and its vagaries, perhaps a little too well. It might help us to understand better this body ego narrative

communicated publicly and the response to it by a quotation from Mike Tyson. In an interview with the writer and amateur boxer Brin-Jonathon Butler, Tyson perceptively remarks:

You have to think that boxing is just narrative. Stories. Why was everyone willing to put more money in the cash register for mine than anyone else? Was I the best? Maybe. But I had the story they cared about most. They saw themselves the most in me, whether they admit it or not.

I [Butler] heard you answer that question once by saying because you were angelic and scum. Is that America, too? (*The Domino Diaries* 10)

Tyson's answer might appear noncommittal. Yet it does in no way detract from his assertion that he told spectators his story and most of them favorably received it and *identified* with him. In this sense, his statement is quite strong and has interpretive potentials. His body ego experience as a boxer grants him his keen perception and ultimately a sharp sense of his *identity*, as subject to moods as it might be. He perceives himself as pulled apart between his angelic body ego ideal and "scummy" id tendencies. However, beyond the pull of voyeurism, one might still justifiably say the spectators bear *witness* to the integrity of Tyson's body ego as it realizes itself as his story of battles fought and won or lost against his opponents. Yet in every fight, he seeks nothing less than to rend asunder the foundation of his opponents' body ego wholeness and in return expects the same treatment from his opponents. It makes manifest, in various degrees of intensity, the schizoid divide between the angelic vs. "scummy" instinctual tendencies in all of us, which continues unto death.

The spectators' interest in Tyson telling his story is acute and genuine. The dialogue between Tyson and his spectators is the opposite of otherizing. The spectators identify with his narrative of one-on-one primordial battle for victory and glory vs defeat and submission. Tyson shares the "feel" of his beleaguered body ego and the viewing crowd either shares it with him or rejects it, but he is no longer the other, the stranger, the alien.

Tyson's schizophrenic psychic split between an idealized socio-ethical "angelic" image of himself and the dreadful sense of being a "scum" as a victim of repressed brutal and brutalizing desires are poignant to the spectators.

According to Freud, in different degrees and extent, an embattled body ego is fundamentally the condition we all share. Perhaps this is more clearly manifest in watching boxing events and other violent contact sports such as American football. The awakening of dormant sadomasochistic tendencies by violent sports disturbs the precarious balance of our body ego. We are forever seeking to evolve and self-actualize through a well-integrated evolutionary ego body; even though overwhelming life forces and death instincts, often unconsciously mixed, at once beset it. For Mailer, I would tend to say, boxers achievement of a stable body ego is in itself a creative act of an imaginative body ego to keep itself well integrated as an indivisible whole.

MAILER ON BOXING AS EXISTENTIAL NARRATIVE

Each boxing match is a story—a unique and highly condensed drama without words. Even when nothing sensational happens: then the drama is “merely” psychological.

Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (8)

It still bears reiterating that according to Mailer boxing is fundamentally a life-and-death nonverbal dialogue within which a genuine story shapes up. These stories are passionate and dramatic but also prodigiously authentic and personal. Each story makes genuine act of making known mysteries of sadomasochistic acts known through free choices that define who the actors truly are. Fighting with one's fists then ideally intends to tell nonverbally the story of inflicting punishment and conquering an opponent. It engenders a ritual language of pain and anguish, humiliation and defeat versus the triumphant visual narration of ultimate superiority and strength. The genuineness of each boxing narrative directly derives from the behavior of two human beings toward one another in this socio-ethically sanctioned, but life-threatening spectacle.

Such *spectacular* narratives immensely appealed to Mailer as a writer of fiction and intellectual with strong psychoanalytic interests of his own. He found a certain inherent power of the as-yet-unknown and as-yet-unthought rendered known in boxing. Only proximity to grave injury or death would divulge the existence of such mysteries. He found something of the secret wisdom of the ancient world in all that. In *The Big Empty*, he tells his interviewer, his son John Buffalo Mailer: “I once heard Muhammad Ali speak of fighting Joe Frazier and saying, ‘Fighting him was like Death.’ And I knew

what he meant. It was right after ‘Thriller in Manilla,’ which Ali won, but it was an unbelievably arduous, grueling, brutal fight” (187–188).

For Mailer, Ali’s distinctive characteristic is his sense of hard-earned, unassailable self-esteem as a fighter. Ali would not relinquish that confidence even in the face of his own “Death.” That defiance of death entitles Ali to the courage and self-confidence to tell an opponent: “Come here and get me, fool,” and add, “You can’t, ‘cause you don’t know who I am. You don’t know where I am. I am human intelligence and you don’t even know whether I’m good or bad” (*On the Fight of the Century* 9). One can dismiss Ali’s statement as exaggerated bravado or worse—a falsehood. Yet it remains true that exaggeration is an overstatement of a thing that already exists.

Ali appears then to define human intelligence at the point where it coincides with hidden powers of magic of body ego over natural forces. He claims that he can make himself and his personal space invisible in plain sight as a kind of magic. He argues that his invisibility is due to his nearly occult inner life, which is imperceptible to his opponents, because they lack his mind-body. There is a quasi-religious dimension to Ali’s claim of power of the absent–presence bestows on his body ego. This mystical empowerment prevents Ali from quitting in the middle of the fight with Frazier when he perceives around him the hovering immediacy of his own death. At least provisionally, death, the veritable annihilator and agent of oblivion, backs down—not however, without leaving Ali with grave and lasting injuries. There is something godlike about such behavior. It possesses an irreducible quotient of mystery of courage and endurance, within which one is reborn in what one does. I believe that only those creative writers conversant with the mind-body language of boxing have comprehended, expressed, and interpreted such mysteries. I would place among them Jack London, A. J. Liebling, Ernest Hemingway, George Plimpton, Norman Mailer and Joyce Carol Oates, just to mention a few who come readily to mind.

MAILER’S MEDITATION ON ALI-FRAZIER “FIGHT OF THE CENTURY”

The ultimate “athlete” is a “cosmic dancer,” an “acrobat of God,” the “TaoAthlete.”

Chungliang Al-Huang and Jerry Lynch,
Thinking Body, Dancing Mind (xxi)

Mailer firmly tells us:

There is no attempting to comprehend a prizefighter unless we are willing to recognize that he speaks with a command of the body which is as detached, subtle and comprehensive in its intelligence as any exercise of mind by such social engineers as Herman Kahn [military strategist] or Henry Kissinger. (In *On the Fight of the Century* 17)

I deem Mailer's argument in the above passage as sound, even though I do not believe in the notion of the body as "detached," but as an integral part of the mind-body unity at rest. Following Freud, I read Mailer's use of the word "body" as "body ego." In my mind, the concept that Mailer communicates as "subtle and comprehensive in its intelligence" is that of a healthy, smoothly functioning body ego. Body ego as such sustains an intentional, active mind-body unity in a state of watchfulness or *Nepsis*. Thus I take Mailer's affirmation of "the body which is as detached, subtle and comprehensive in its intelligence as any exercise of the mind by social engineers" as a supremely well integrated body ego, from which such capabilities burst forth.

Mailer points out that there are different modes of body languages, some of which comprise nonverbal language of athletics. Prizefighting is naturally among them, because it sets in motion a predominantly poignant, complex nonverbal body ego debate. Mailer writes, "Boxing is a rapid debate between two sets of intelligence" (*On the Fight of the Century* 18-19). More often than not, the existential significance of these debates culminates in close proximity to aporetic states of body ego crises. Consequently, unpacking the basic elements of disclosures of such close encounters necessitates a rare vision of matters pugilistic as well as kinesiological, linguistic, and psycho-philosophical considerations. It is accurate to say that Mailer gained the right of access to such a vision.

The Ali-Frazier fight ("The Fight of the Century")—held on Monday, March 8, 1971 at Madison Square Garden—not surprisingly would bring forth the following reflections from Mailer:

If there is a single word our century has added to the potentiality of language, it is ego. Everything we have done in this century, from monumental feats to nightmares of human destruction, has been a function of that extraordinary state of

the psyche which gives us authority to declare we are sure of ourselves when we are not. (*On the Fight of the Century* 9)

In the above passage, I would say Mailer is acutely aware of Freud's statement, "A person's own body, and above all its surface, is a place from which both external and internal perceptions may spring" (*The Id and the Ego* 15). One might add that Freud's major concept of body ego has been the basis of the 20th century concept of ego psychoanalysis. Ego psychoanalysts Anna Freud and Heinz Hartmann, and mind-body psychoanalysts and psychotherapists Wilhelm Reich and Alexander Lowen advanced this psychoanalytic perspective. In the past two decades, it has also been the focus of neuroscientists such as Antonio Damasio and neuropsychanalysts Oliver Sacks, Mark Solms, Oliver Turnbull, the late Jaak Panskepp, and others. It is because Freud places both "external and internal perceptions" within the body ego in his psychic apparatus.

Body ego plays an exceptionally large role in our everyday lived experiences—fraught as its wholeness is by obsessive-compulsive desires of the id, unconscious, super ego, and conscious rational demands. In this psychoanalytic light, Mailer's emphasis on the transcendent potential of the word "ego" as *the* significant and signifying "word" of the 20th century does not seem to be at all that extravagant. One speculates this is so because the 20th century defied the Freudian concept of body ego balance. It confirmed the powers that Freud theorized as the death instincts (Thanatos), the antithesis of life instincts (Eros), and the ultimate winner since all living things eventually die and disappear. The individual's body ego had to deal with the 20th century's mechanized carnage of two world wars, the Holocaust, and the annihilative power of the atomic bombs and remain viable. There was, and continues to be, the possibility of total triumph of Thanatos over Eros. The two opposite instincts often merged with sinister psycho-political forces. Mailer was no doubt amply aware of all that and how it would relate to Ali's body ego balance, "overdetermined" as it was by his race, politics, and religion (his conversion to Islam and all that it implied).

As ego-psychoanalyst, Alexander Lowen has put it:

The character of the individual as it is manifested in his typical pattern of behavior is also portrayed on the somatic level by the form and movement of the body. The sum total of the muscu-

lar tensions seen as a gestalt, that is, as a unity, the manner of moving and acting constitutes the “body expression” of the organism. The body expression is the somatic view of the typical emotional expression which is seen on the psychic level as “character.” (*The Language of the Body* 15)

From this psychosomatic view of character, Mailer recognizes in Ali the most extraordinary pugilist of the last century. He judges in Ali’s nonverbal dialogic kinetics an unparalleled eloquence. He articulates a complex worldview with his fists as a pugilist. This judgement made deep inroads into Mailer’s capacious and feverish imagination as an imaginative writer and amateur boxer. Ali’s body ego personality enabled Mailer assert, “Muhammad Ali begins with the most unsettling ego of all” (*On the Fight of the Century* 9). He later adds:

So, he [Ali] is obsessive. The more we don’t want to think about him, the more we are obliged to. There is a reason for it. He is America’s greatest ego. He is also, as I am going to try to show, the swiftest embodiment of human intelligence we have had yet, he is the very spirit of the 20th century. . . . (*On the Fight of the Century* 11)

Mailer’s declaration that our thinking about Ali was “obsessive” might seem overstated today. Just the same, Mailer explains, “He [Ali] is America’s greatest ego”—not the largest, but the greatest ego. Which means that on some level of our psyche we aspire to the rare balance of Ali’s evolving, well-balanced body ego. Young and triumphant then, Ali manages to juggle conflicting ideas and motives, and devotions while maintaining his body ego’s psychical integrity. It follows then that failing to identify with Ali would create prodigious anxiety for not being able to join the rank of the “swiftest embodiment of human intelligence we have had yet.” For a competitive writer and true lover of knowledge like Mailer, as I think of him, this would have meant a loss of the very spirit of the 20th century.

Moreover, in Ali’s consummate pugilistic intelligence, knowledge, and creativity, Mailer detects an imaginative narrative of his unusually large body ego. Ali’s body ego tells the story of his originality, the upsurge of his inimitable style and its significations. In addition, for those who are interested, it

obsessively evokes the art of boxing as nonverbal art and its potential psycho-philosophical interpretations. After all is said and done, Mailer attributes all this to Ali's multifaceted verbal and nonverbal narrative and to his expansive and expanding body ego strength. Ali's intuitive and creative capabilities afforded him an inner life with a horizon of keen experiential discoveries, which differentiated him from other heavyweight champions. Mailer compared such inner life to those of

Hemingway and Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy or Faulkner, Joyce or Melville or Conrad or Lawrence or Proust. Hemingway is the example above all. Because he wished to be the greatest in the history of literature and still be a hero with all the body arts age would yet grant him, he was alone and he knew it. (*On the Fight of the Century* 34)

Mailer fully appreciated that expressive richness of Ali's boxing, which assimilated into it the sort of refinement and imaginative creativity we associate with arts such as dancing. Ali's devotion to the art of boxing also makes manifest traces generally associated with symbolic religious performances such as the Sufis engage in. Thus as an art, each boxing event generates a novel world of discovery as passionate artistic performance to be studied.

DIALOGIC NARRATIVE DISCOURSE OF BOXING AND BANTU PHILOSOPHY

... the Bantu speak of God himself as "the strong one", he who possesses Force in himself. He is also the source of Force of every creature.

Father Placide Temples, *Bantu Philosophy* (46)

The Fight (1974) is Mailer's magnum opus on boxing. It is a heady mixture of forthright reporting and psycho-philosophical observations on the historic heavyweight championship bout between heavyweight champion Foreman and challenger Ali ("The Rumble in the Jungle"). It is noteworthy that before his return to Kinshasa, Zaire (now The Democratic Republic of Congo) Mailer by chance discovered a copy of *Bantu Philosophy* in a second-hand bookstore in New York City. The author of the book was Belgian

Franciscan Missionary Father Placide Temples (1906–1977). A translation of it from Flemish into French appeared as *La philosophie Bantoue* in 1945 in Zaïre, and subsequently into English as *Bantu Philosophy* in 1959. Father Temples' was a pioneering work. It introduced a study of African philosophy, which he attributed to the people of Sub-Saharan Africa who are from different ethnic backgrounds but speak Bantu. Today, Bantu no longer signifies ethnicity as it did for Father Temple. Nevertheless, *Bantu Philosophy* remains a valuable contribution to one mode of African philosophy, in spite of often being controversial among younger African and western philosophers in its ethical attribution and some of its references.

In retrospect, Mailer's accidental discovery of *Bantu Philosophy* in a New York City second-hand bookstore must have been an intimation of bibliomancy to him, a surprise intellectual discovery of profound consequence. It resulted in a transnational, transracial, transcultural experience in philosophy and theology. It jolted Mailer out of habitual intellectual thought patterns and he acknowledged:

Given a few of his own ideas, Norman's excitement was not small as he read *Bantu Philosophy*. For he discovered that the instinctive philosophy of African tribesmen happened to be close to his own. Bantu philosophy, he soon learned, saw humans as forces, not beings. Without putting it into words, he had always believed that. It gave a powerful shift to his thoughts. (*The Fight* 38)

To Mailer, this "powerful shift" was tantamount to a metaphysical paradigm shift distinct from his own mostly Western metapsychology and metaphysics. It also brought him a new ontology, developed within its consideration that "being is force." Father Temples states, "Force is even more than a necessary attribute of being: *Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force* (*Bantu Philosophy*, emphasis in the original, 51). For Mailer, the philosophical assertion that being is force initiates a new and all-encompassing ontology.

Mailer's second remarkable find was *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World* by the German intellectual and scholar of Sub-Saharan literature Janheinz Jahn. According to Jahn:

Muntu . . . is a Bantu word and is usually translated as ‘man’. But the concept of ‘Muntu’ embraces the living and the dead, ancestors and deified ancestors: gods. The unity expressed by the inclusive concept of ‘Muntu’ is one of the characteristics of African culture, and further peculiarities are derived from it. . . . Yet at the same time the concept ‘Muntu’ points to the fact that all differences in the nature of man have their common denominator. (*Muntu: African Culture and the Western World* 18).

The consequences of reading of *Bantu Philosophy* on Mailer in writing *The Fight* cannot be underestimated. This exegesis on Bantu philosophy makes intelligible to him some of the ideas that had previously existed in his own mind and remained ineffable. For Mailer, an intellectual, polymath, and bibliophile it must have been a radical experience to read Jahn’s *Muntu* philosophy after Father Temples’ *Bantu Philosophy*. I daresay that his reading these two philosophical texts on African philosophy inadvertently must have appeared to Mailer as a sort of mystical experience to which he was prone. In his mind, it most likely approximated an epiphany connected with bibliomancy. Norman finds *Bantu Philosophy* contained some of his own ideas: considering “humans as forces, not beings.” Thus, Mailer:

By such logic, men or women were more than the parts of themselves, which is to say more than the result of their heredity and experience. A man was not only what he contained, not only his desires, his memory, and his personality, but also the forces that came to inhabit him at any moment from all things living and dead. So a man was not only himself, but the karma of all the generations past that still lived in him, not only a human with his own psyche but a part of the resonance, sympathetic or unsympathetic, of every root and thing (and witch about him. (*The Fight* 38)

Mailer found it a happy and fortunate coincidence that Bantu philosophy conceptualized the existence of the possibility of freedom in every individual’s psyche to break away from determinism. Genetics, instinctive desires, memories, and personality characteristics of various kinds do not negate ultimate freedom. Everyone lives as a force seeking more force through one-

ness with ancestral karmic modes of connection. There is always a “mystical bond” with the undead dead, as it were, that sustains our current force and enables us to increase it. Within an overall *living* cultural heritage, one accesses the departed in the common force of living language as prayers and invocations. Language as such is an inexhaustible source of energy. In Bantu philosophy, this “bond” remains an inalienable “vital force” in every individual.

Mailer was already inclined to think such “vital force” existed and persisted in psycho-philosophy of African-American heavyweight prizefighters and expressed itself in their nonverbal mind-body dialogues. He deemed it true in spite of the fact that slavery had pitilessly stripped away African-Americans from their extensive ancestral cultural inheritance. Organized slavery endeavored to deracinate the prior rich heritage of American blacks. This attempt at deracination included the Blacks’ all-embracing metaphysics in its entirety: their philosophy, psychology, religion, ethics, and rituals—put briefly, their entire ancestral culture.

One can imagine Mailer’s intellectual excitement in reading the following sentences by Father Temples, broadly echoing his own views: “*The gulf dividing Africans and whites will remain and widen so long as we do not meet them in the wholesome aspirations of their own ontology*” (*Bantu Philosophy*, emphasized in the original, 26). Elsewhere, Father Temples simply states, “Bantu behavior is centred in a single value: vital force,” for Bantu the supreme value “*is life, force, to live strongly, or vital force*” (*Bantu philosophy*, emphasized in the original, 44). He later adds, “*forces, the potent life, vital energy* are the objects of prayers and invocations to God, to the spirits and to the dead, as well as of all that is usually called magic, sorcery, or magical remedies” (*Bantu Philosophy*, emphasized in the original 45). Still later, he explains, “the Bantu speak of God himself as the ‘Strong One,’ he who possesses Force in himself” (*Bantu Philosophy* 46). This Bantu theological definition corresponds to “Almighty God” as all-powerful, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and so forth in the Abrahamic religions of the Middle East.

In a vibrant paragraph, Mailer takes all that impassions him about the theory of “vital force” in Bantu philosophy as a worldview and religion to new theoretical planes of exploration, explanation, and prediction. Again, he does so to better scrutinize the multi-layered psychophysical constitution of African-American heavyweight champions. What Mailer truly wanted to

know was something prodigiously difficult: the essence of blackness of black heavyweight champions in the light of Bantu philosophy. Even though Ali had converted to Islam, what Mailer wanted to discover in Ali were the remnants of his heritage of black culture. It was what leading Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001), and writer and intellectual Alioune Diop (1910–1980) referred to as “*Negritude*.” Mailer reveals that

There was now enough intellectual baggage to miss the train. Norman would bring some of it along, and hoped he was not greedy. For Heavyweight Boxing was almost all black, black as Bantu. So boxing had become another key to revelations of Black, one more key to black emotions, black *psychology*, black love. Heavyweight boxing might also lead to the room in the underground of the world where Black kings were installed: What was Black emotion, Black psychology, Black love? Of course, to try to learn from boxers was quintessentially comic quest. Boxers were liars. Champions were great liars. They had to be. Once you knew what they thought, you could hit them. So their personalities became masterpieces of concealment. *There would be limits to what he could learn from Ali and Foreman by the aid of any philosophy. Still, he was grateful for the clue. Humans were not beings but forces. He would try to look at them by that light.* (*The Fight*, emphasis added 43)

The above passage exhibits Mailer’s recurrent interest in the emotional Gestalt *psychology* of Blacks in general and American Blacks in particular. However, he finally focuses most noticeably and most importantly on the heavyweight Black fighters, who were as “Black as Bantu.” Even though Ali had converted to Islam, Mailer finds Bantu spirit as an ancestral force still existed in him. According to Mailer “Ali’s seriousness might as well be rooted in the molten iron of the earth,” as a boiling cauldron of self-revitalizing energy (*The Fight* 79).

Mailer’s struggles to maintain and constantly increase energy to alter the environment remained remarkably strong, which coincide with Bantu theory of maintaining “vital force.”

Yes, *Bantu Philosophy* proved to be the “gift” and the “clue,” the keys to the room, if not indeed the kingdom, where riches as profound as the dead an-

cestral kings were installed to live again in the dialogic narratives of triumphant Black heavyweight fighters such as Ali, Frazier and Foreman. These African-American heavyweights derived their strength from a different ontology, the ontology of the “vital force,” which *is* and *exists* in its totality as “vital force.” The strength that Muhammad Ali’s body ego thrived on was the ontology of “vital force” in the boxing arena.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I began this essay by offering an analysis of Norman Mailer’s theory of boxing as “dialogue between two bodies,” as inseparable source of power. It provided us with a phenomenological description of boxing from which a nonverbal dialogic discourse and narrative issues forth. Mailer applies his dialogic theory of boxing to Ali’s body ego narrative. Ultimately, Mailer in the light of Bantu philosophy expands his theory of boxing as nonverbal dialogue into the philosophical discourse toward which it develops. He seeks to extend its ontology to coincide with the cosmology of Bantu philosophy based on primal “vital force,” somewhat reminiscent of the Big Bang Theory and the contemporary cosmogony.

While doing so, Mailer concentrates his theoretical reflections on the Ali-George Frazier fight in his *On the Fight of the Century*, and the Ali-Foreman championship fight in *The Fight in Zaire*. It is in *The Fight*, however, that he offers us his remarkably instructive way to see boxing at once as a nonverbal dialogic enterprise and a new psycho-philosophical perspective. It is my hope that further studies might explore and enlarge this perspective in yet new ways.

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