

## Claude Boli, *Mohamed Ali*

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## REFERENCES

Boli, Claude, *Mohamed Ali*, Paris: Gallimard, Folio biographies, 2016, 303 pages + appendices, 8,20 €, ISBN: 978-2-07-045410-5

- 1 Some say he is indeed the “greatest”, the best-known person on earth, ahead of Pélé or Michael Jackson<sup>1</sup>. From the sidewalks of big cities where peddlers sell posters of his knock-out punches to the genteel halls of universities and museums where his memory is celebrated, “Mohammed Ali” is a worldwide phenomenon that cuts across racial, ethnic, and class lines. Ali’s life has been recounted so many times and in so many formats that the prospect of learning anything truly new about “the Greatest” – a nickname Ali gave himself – is always slim<sup>2</sup>. Claude Boli’s biography, published in 2016 a few weeks after the boxer’s death, achieves this feat. Although it does not break any new ground in terms of biographical details or historical interpretation, it is an important book for francophone readers interested in putting Ali’s life into context as it raises issues related to sports and politics, the media, and race relations.

## SUMMARY

- 2 Boli starts off with a well-informed portrayal of racial realities in the US between the 17<sup>th</sup> century and 1942 when Ali, then known as Cassius Marcellus Clay, Junior, was born to black parents in the segregation-stricken West End of Louisville, Kentucky. “Cash” Senior, his flamboyant father, worked several jobs (advertisement painter, night-club entertainer), while his religious mother cleaned white families’ houses (11-23). Louisville, a city at the gate of the Jim Crow South, offered few opportunities for its nonwhite residents, except for the more athletically gifted. At 12, Clay Junior discovered boxing in “

Sergeant” Joe Martin’s gym, which according to legend, he entered to vent his anger after somebody had stolen his brand new bicycle (25).

- 3 Clay Junior grew up to be a fast, smart, and disciplined boxer, who stayed away from alcohol and women. He was groomed by Joe Martin who led him to his first breakthrough at the Golden Gloves, a local and national tournament (35-44) followed by the 1960 Rome Olympics where he won gold, beating the Polish favorite Pietrzykowski (45-59).
- 4 For his homecoming in Louisville, a group of local businessmen – mostly Black lawyers – founded a committee to represent his business interests, which guaranteed Clay a decent living away from mobsters (61). Under his new coach Angelo Dundee – who stood in his corner throughout his career – Ali managed to take advantage of idiosyncratic body skills to invent a new form of boxing; he was in effect a lightweight in the body of a heavyweight. After a few years of easy wins against lesser opponents (74-84), Clay turned professional and went on to contend for the heavyweight championship. He trained daily in a ramshackle gym in Miami’s black district of Overtown where he led an austere life (83) under the supervision of Coach Dundee who managed to get the best of Ali’s creativity by never instructing him what to do (167-170).
- 5 Ali knew how to cater to the media: thanks to his press conferences filled with rapped poems and rhymed quips, often coined by his sidekick Drew Brown “Bundini,” he upped the promotional ante before a fight. With phrases like “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,” Ali became the darling of the press. However, many thought he was but a clown and few believed he had the stuff to defeat the truly great punchers of the time, like Floyd Paterson or Sonny Liston (85-107). In 1963, he started a literal media blitzkrieg (109) to destabilize Sonny Liston, the title-holder and undisputed favorite. On February 25, 1964, against all odds, Clay beat him thanks to his unmatched celerity, derring-do and powerful left jabs and despite rumors that Liston had tried to blind him with an irritating substance (123). The next day Clay announced he was a member of the Nation of Islam and that he wished to be known as Muhammad Ali so as to free himself from the slave name given to his ancestors (126-139).
- 6 His joining the “Black Muslims” turned the well-liked showman into a sudden pariah. The New York press corps, led by Jimmy Cannon, Dick Young or Red Smith, cast him as an ungrateful, spoiled kid, spewing racial hatred, Black separatism and dubious anti-Americanism (138). To many black leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, he was dangerously undermining decades of efforts to bridge the racial gaps. Floyd Patterson, another heavyweight contender that Ali beat in 1965, made for a much better spokesperson for the nonviolent integrationist strategy they had chosen (142-144). Taking his cue from his once close friend and mentor Malcolm X, Ali refused to wait for the “white man” to give the “black man” crumbs of opportunity. He also refused to conform to any model of behaviors set by others. He famously said, “Yes, I will be the people’s champ, but not the way you want me to be” (quoted in Mann’s movie, *Ali*).
- 7 In the boxing rings, Ali remained the undefeated world champion for three years using a combination of thunder-fast leg moves (“the Ali shuffle”) and well-adjusted jabs and hooks to disarm his strongest opponents. He also engaged in mental warfare by giving nicknames to his adversaries and taunting them at every occasion (150-157). His verbal attacks – that “Marvelous Mouth,” in Tom Wolfe’s words – earned him a swath of criticism, compounded by a nasty campaign characterizing his boxing style as too showy and tricky, not hard-hitting enough. In 1967, faced against opponent Ernie Terrel, Ali

insisted the latter call him Ali, not Clay anymore. Terrel demurred for the sake of promoting the bout (161), but as Ali went on to demolish him in the ring, repeatedly shouting “What’s my name?”, the press corps lambasted the fighter from Louisville for being a cruel, barbaric butcher. Obviously, Ali’s fault was his belonging to the Nation of Islam and being surrounded by a “black guard” (173-180), and some “white niggers” (181-185) like Norman Mailer or ABC sportscaster Howard Cosell.

- 8 In April 1967, Ali’s career stopped suddenly after his refusal to be inducted into the US Army to fight in the Vietnam War, although he would have likely received preferential treatment as an athletic supervisor. For refusing the draft he was sentenced to a 5-year imprisonment by a federal court (195) as well as stripped of his titles and boxing license. Ali’s rationale is well captured in his response to a journalist asking for explanations: “I ain’t got no quarrel with them Vietcong. No Vietcong ever called me a nigger” (188)<sup>3</sup>. His insubordination unsurprisingly furthered the campaign to vilify him: Murray Robinson called him “a coward,” Red Smith “a scoundrel,” Jimmy Cannon “a beatnik” (189-190); former star athletes like Joe Louis – one of Ali’s heroes – or civil rights pioneer Jackie Robinson berated such an “unpatriotic” attitude. The FBI put Ali under surveillance in order to make him bend, fearing his civil disobedience in the name of religious beliefs and personal freedom might discourage black youth to enlist (195).
- 9 Deprived of his boxing revenues, Ali turned to public speaking to make a living. From 1967 to 1970, he gave about 200 lectures, first at historically black colleges like Fisk, then in integrated universities such as Purdue, Harvard, or Yale. A plainspoken orator, he galvanized youth crowds with engaging themes such as Vietnam, race relations, black nationalism, interracial marriages, drug use and other societal topics, about which his white liberal audience often differed (196-202). Because he admitted to seeking to return to the ring for money, he was excommunicated from the Nation of Islam, which lent him further support from black radicals and antiwar leaders (203).
- 10 Thanks to a support campaign led by *Esquire*, Ali managed to get back in the boxing business in 1970 in Atlanta, where he defeated Jerry Quarry. In the capital of Georgia, Ali was crowned king of “Black power and Black money” (210) by the affluent black community who turned out in droves, including such figures as The Supremes, Bill Cosby, Ralph Ellison, and most civil right leaders.
- 11 Yet, his true comeback occurred in March 1971 against Joe Frazier, the illegitimate world champion whom Ali called a “gorilla.” Frazier was known as a brutish fighter who had punched his way out of poverty in the rings of Black Chicago. Their face-off was a multi-million dollar event that took place in New York City’s Madison Square Garden (214). With the world watching – TV had by then fully developed its symbiotic relationship with the sports world – Frazier beat Ali after 15 rounds of outstanding boxing (218-219)<sup>4</sup>. Subsequently, Frazier was defeated by George Foreman whom Ali decided to challenge in order to regain his championship belt.
- 12 Enters Don King, the black sports promoter who took the world by storm when he set out to stage the first heavyweight championship on the African continent. King struck a golden deal with Mobutu who was leading his country – Zaire – through a wave of nationalistic and modernizing reforms. While in Kinshasa for a few weeks before the match (postponed to October 1974 because Foreman suffered an injury) Ali became the idol of “Kin’s” population as he displayed a genuine interest in mingling with the locals, wearing African garb, and learning a few phrases in the vernacular. His attempt to bridge black America and Africa spread to the whole continent, notably in the Ivory Coast. Here,

Claude Boli takes obvious pleasure in narrating Ali's reception by the residents of Abobo, where the author's own ancestors come from, such as his brother Basile, a hero of French football, who was known there as "Mohammed Ali" for his pugilistic skills (248).

- 13 Ali won the "Rumble in the Jungle" after eight painful rounds, against the predictions of most experts who thought his time away from the rings at the prime of his career would have made him an easy prey for Foreman's devastating hooks to the flanks. In fact, Ali outsmarted Foreman by retreating to the ropes so that the latter would gradually lose speed and stamina, a technique now known as "Rope-a-Dope." The revenge match, once again run by Don King, took place in Manila, Philippines ("the Thrilla in Manila", October 1975).
- 14 As the second part of the 1970s wore on, Ali, now in his mid-30s, refused to hang up his gloves<sup>5</sup>, much to the chagrin of his relatives and sportswriters who resented that he fought beyond his capacities against better, younger opponents who – nonetheless – wouldn't bring themselves to humiliating the legend by "finishing" him with a knock-out. More alarming was Ali's deteriorating health: he started to show early signs of Parkinson's, probably because of the repeated blows he had to endure during training and competitions.
- 15 Throughout the 1980s and 90s, Ali the pariah, the Vietnam dissenter and overall black menace to the establishment, acquired a new public image as the embodiment of American courage and freethinking. The reinvention took place through a series of stages, including President Ford's instrumentalization of Ali in 1974 (270) as well as Carter's when he sent him as an ambassador of good will to the USSR (281). In 2005, even his hometown of Louisville – oblivious to its former denigration of Ali (192) – embraced the boxer's heritage by opening a museum and a cultural center dedicated to the values he embodied.
- 16 In 1996, Ali's debilitating disease was displayed to the world when he appeared at the Olympic Games Opening Ceremony in Atlanta to be the last carrier of the torch. Millions of viewers held their breath as the three-time heavyweight champion strove to light up the cauldron, his left hand shaking incessantly. The cauldron lit and kept burning for 17 days. Instantly – according to Boli – the boxer was reborn as an icon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a symbol of resilience that heralded Barack Obama's election at the head of a so-called post-racial America.

## APPRAISAL

- 17 Claude Boli, who was trained as a sociologist and historian in France and the UK, is to be commended for achieving the rare feat of writing a biography that is highly readable yet doesn't simplify or overlook the context in which the studied life unfolded. Among other very compelling passages, the pages he dedicates to the co-development of Ali's fame and renewed black nationalism (126-149) or the rise of television as the number one medium for communicating to the masses and generating profit (101-110) will be very useful for francophone readers looking to go beyond the usual simplistic snapshots. Boli also proves an expert in analyzing the various styles in heavyweight boxing (153-157) and knows how to render the thrills of a fight. He is also very convincing when explaining that in the 1960s, Islam was viewed as the religion of the marginalized, while Christianity was thought to support and serve white power (128).

- 18 The main shortcoming of *Mohamed Ali* stems from its very nature as a general audience biography. Because of editing constraints – or so I assume – Boli rarely cites his sources when making his most compelling points, thus forcing the reader to take his word at face value. More frustrating for the historian, the number of primary sources is limited to about fifty, most of which are articles from sporting publications. Even general audience biographies would gain from using first-hand sources and expanding the pool of studied material to areas outside the scope of the subject matter, for example, urban history, media studies, or critical race theory. In this respect, I was surprised to see a trained sociologist use the French phrases “noir”, “africain-américain” or “gens de couleurs” uncritically and interchangeably.
- 19 Another minor shortcoming lies in the failure of the author to situate his book within the rich list of works published on Ali. Ironically, Boli devotes three pages (189-191) to the presence of Ali in the printed world, from Mailer, through Hauser, Marqusee, Remnick, Early, Oates and Philonenko, but he fails to exploit his extensive knowledge of the existing literature to lay out his thesis or at least suggest a possible reading of Ali’s life.
- 20 Also surprisingly absent is a thorough discussion of Ali as a businessman or product. Although Ali did well for himself and died a millionaire, he made a lot of rich people richer thanks to his virtual sacrifice in boxing rings. Boli, who wrote about the making of Manchester United as a cultural and economic powerhouse, had the conceptual tools to broach this question. As a social scientist, he could have also introduced the broader audience to concepts such as blackness, masculinity, and social mobility so as to discuss how these played out in Ali’s life and public reception. To state the obvious, Ali is one of the best known incarnations of the “American Dream,” which reinforces the illusion that sports and hard work will inevitably lead to social mobility.
- 21 Finally, a few questions remain unanswered: Why did Ali accept the accolades of Civil Rights leaders like Coretta King or Ralph Abernathy in October 1970 (210) whereas he had been so condescending of “Uncle Toms” throughout the 1960s? What was Ali’s impact in US public diplomacy, be it in the USSR or during his fight for human rights in Bosnia in the 1990s (Bayne)? Lastly, what is one to make of his reinvention as “an object of heritage” (297)? I would like to discuss this last point in relation to his mediated image and subsequent “branding” (301), both being insufficiently analyzed by Boli in my opinion.

## DISCUSSION

- 22 As well shown by Boli but even more compellingly by Remnick, Ali was a polarizing figure not only between black and white America, but also within the black community. His stance for Islam, for black nationalism, for black pride and against Blacks’ sacrifice in Vietnam led to a “backlash” (Townsend) evidenced by the negative coverage he received from black newspapers such as Frank Stanley’s *Louisville Defender*. Indeed, Ali’s ways of “achieving equality were antithetical to the views of the Black middle-class establishment in Louisville and across America” (ibid). This would not be so significant if Ali had not been such a mediated figure, or to use Bayne’s pun “a ringmaster of the media ” (Bayne). Throughout his career he featured in movies (his first as early as 1962) and TV series, sang for Columbia Records in 1963 with Miles Davis and other luminaries, wrote many autobiographies, and appeared countless times in the mainstream press or illustrated

magazines. In other words, Ali was as much a boxer as he was a showman, or a chameleonic Zelig who could amuse the audience by impersonating clowns, animals, TV presenters, northern and southern black folks, etc. Because he was self-aware and knew how to laugh at himself, his message on the plight of black Americans became more palatable.

- 23 At a time when politics and sports were thought to be incompatible, at a moment in US history when race had been calcified in a white/black opposition, he became an acceptable figure of dissent because he knew how to both play the media and be played by it. His antiwar stance in 1967 – however damaging to his career – encouraged someone like Reverend King to also speak up against the war. Besides, his rousing speeches on campuses “helped to create African American studies courses and Black cultural centers” according to McGregor, who goes so far as to characterize Ali as an “important figure within the New Left”.
- 24 Ali astoundingly managed to achieve all this without a proper PR agent; he was his own impresario, quite a feat in the age of Brian Epsteins and Malcolm McLarens. But the price of independence was steep: when stripped of his boxing license in 1967, few of his former friends showed solidarity, except Howard Cosell, the white ABC sportscaster who also supported Smith and Carlos in Mexico in 1968. Even Houdini and Elijah Muhammad’s son left him financially stranded, as cruelly shown in Mann’s biopic *Ali*. Ali’s return to the rings in 1970 symbolically played out as a conditional reintegration: America had redeemed him so he had a debt to repay, the full extent of which can be properly gauged in Ali’s post-mortem career. At his funeral, as noted by Townsend, the emphasis was laid on his courage not his subversive messages: “Ali was transformed from a firebrand activist to a Zen-like figure of global unity and peace,” Townsend writes.
- 25 The subsequent Disneyfication of Ali (to borrow from Cornel West’s assessment of the neutralizing of Martin Luther King’s radicalism) came hand in hand with the transformation of his name as a brand. In fact, even some of his famous quips have been monetized: if one wanted to print the phrase “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,” one would have to pay copyright fees to a company called ABG (301). The “initial danger” (Zirin) that Ali represented has been subsumed to buzzwords and selling catchphrases; “the nexus of faith, arrogance, virtue, compassion, violence, pride, determination, lyricism and autonomy” (Townsend) that he embodied has been chewed, digested and regurgitated under a new “Rebel Sell” (Heath) non-subversive form which ironically derives its appeal from its facade of danger and subversion. Thus Ali fits well into postmodern readings of the real as simulacrum and society as spectacle (Baudrillard).
- 26 It was clearly not Boli’s intention to write a biography informed by critical theory, yet one can pity the fact that such interpretations of our contemporary world as the ones presented by Baudrillard, Frank, or Zirin are rarely integrated into books for the general audience. What are we, scholars, trying to protect when isolating “facts” from “interpretation”? We can only wish for more biographies, especially in the realm of sports, which engage not only with the context but with interpretations of the context, in the fashion of Sylvie Laurent’s on Martin Luther King.

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## NOTES

1. I owe a debt of gratitude to Darcy Ballister for her help with an earlier version of this review.
2. Boli's biography complements a handful of books in French (Philonenko 2007; Lelorain 2008; Bal 2009) and a plethora in English (Gorn ed. 1995; Remnick 1998; Marqsee 2000; Hauser 2004), to name but a few.
3. Ali is also reported to have said, "Why should I be required to drop bullets and bombs on Brown people in Vietnam why so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs" (quoted in Townsend).
4. This match and many others are rewatchable on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctKAGKVpCUU>).
5. He held his last match in 1981 at age 39 – a loss to Trevor Berbick, only the fifth in his two-decade career.

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