

Staging the boxing ring as heterotopia in Marco Ramirez's *The Royale*

P. Solomon Lennox

To paraphrase anthropologist, James D. Faubion, the modern-day boxing ring neatly fits a definition of a heterotopia, insofar as it is a space apart “open but isolated, of controlled access and egress.”¹ The space between the ropes is open to the combatants, their seconds, and the referee, and as a raised platform, enclosed by the corner posts and the ropes, the boxing ring stands apart and is isolated from the space occupied by the spectators. As a space governed by the time-bound ritualistic performance practices of boxing, the boxing ring operates mechanisms of spatial and temporal control. During a round (three-minutes in duration for males competing in the professional ranks), only the boxers and the referee are permitted within the space. The seconds (the boxer's coaching team), have just the set time between rounds (sixty seconds) where they are permitted entrance to the space to attend to their charge. The boxing ring engages temporalities distinct from those beyond the ropes. Similarly, the activity permitted within the ropes, two boxers striking one another, is sanctioned within the space of the ring, but would constitute a criminal offence if, for example, spectators engaged in the same activity inside the auditorium. The boxing ring proper is a heterotopia, in part, because of the alternate ordering that occurs between the space inside the ring and the space within the auditorium. The physical and metaphorical distance created by the spatial ordering of the boxing ring propagates the idea that the boxer in the ring is a lonely and isolated figure.

The concepts of loneliness and isolation are perpetuated by academic ethnographies on boxing, journalistic accounts of prize fights, and fictional portrayals of the sport on stage and screen.

These readings of the sport form the texts through which the narrative resources of boxing are

constructed.² Because, as qualitative researchers, Brett Smith and Andrew Sparkes observe, “we live in a story-shaped world [...] and identity is narratively constructed,” it is important to understand the stories people live by and the narrative resources that support identity projects.³ Marco Ramirez’s play *The Royale* portrays boxing in a manner which simultaneously invokes and challenges narrative resources of loneliness and isolation.⁴ The boxing ring in *The Royale* functions as heterotopia, but rather than closing off and isolating the play’s protagonist and fictional boxer, Jay Jackson, Ramirez’s staging choices produce an altogether different embodied experience. Here, the ring affords a particular spatiotemporal disruption, facilitating connections for Jay with an apparition of his sister, Nina, and with a remembered past and imagined future. Nina’s specter is present in the ring in the final scene of *The Royale*. As a ghost-like figure, Nina haunts Jay.

This chapter draws upon Avery Gordon’s work on ghosts, specifically, Gordon’s argument that a haunting represents a moment when one’s bearing on the world loses direction and the concealed, and over-and-done-with comes back into view.⁵ A haunting represents a transformative recognition, affording an individual an opportunity to imagine alternate orderings and alternate ways of living. To this end, the staged haunting within the heterotopia of *The Royale* serves as a useful mechanism through which to examine the story-shaped world of boxing and the formation of alternate narrative resources and boxing identities.

Responding to Joanne Tompkins’ assertion that there is “considerable scope for a heterotopic analysis that places much more attention on the communicating capacity of time in relation to spatiality,” this chapter considers how, in Ramirez’s play, the heterotopia of the boxing ring enables the enactment of cross-spatiotemporal slippage.⁶ Through this slippage, the dominant narrative resources that support the sport of boxing are challenged, as the ring is presented as not

exclusively a place of loneliness and isolation, but a site wherein connections are formed. For Tompkins, for a theatrical heterotopia to have any potency, the articulation of the alternate ordering must drive toward some form of social change. By considering the spatiotemporal qualities of Ramirez's boxing ring, through the theoretical lens of haunting, a methodology is offered that demonstrates how theatre enables sporting space to be read differently. In doing so, this methodology provides additional and alternative narrative resources about the sport of boxing, thus having the potential to inform how the sport is understood and how individual boxers craft their identities.

I have previously demonstrated the extent to which there is slippage between the actual and fictitious representations of the sport.⁷ For example, numerous boxers have adorned the ring attire of the fictitious boxer, Apollo Creed from the Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* franchise.

Similarly, the ring is a space where boxers are able to re-enact legendary bouts, as demonstrated by Naseem Hamed in 1994 when he re-performed a memory of Sugar Ray Leonard's 1985 beating of Marvin Hagler in 1987. This is to say that the boxing ring should be understood as a site capable of facilitating more complex and connected experiences than the narrative resources of the sport would suggest. The boundaries between boxing texts (the sport proper and its fictional representations) are porous, allowing for a bleeding between resources. Theatrical representations such as Ramirez's *The Royale*, where an understanding of the possible cross-spatiotemporal disruption of the boxing ring is made explicit, demand study, not just for what they contribute to the fields of theatre and performance studies, but because of the contributions they make to other disciplines such as qualitative inquiry. Through his staging choices, Ramirez demonstrates, as novelist and boxing journalist Norman Mailer suggests, that the experience of being in the boxing ring is "considerably different from what we believe it is. More intense, more

mystical, more ‘spooky’ if you will, than anything we see on the outside.”⁸ I offer a counter experience and thus an alternate narrative resource through which to understand boxing and the experience of boxing bodies. As will be demonstrated, this provides opportunities to challenge the violence of projected and singular experiences across individuated bodies.

The Royale

Marco Ramirez’s *The Royale: A Play in Six Rounds*, is the story of a boxing underdog. The protagonist, Jay Jackson, is a Black boxer in America during the Jim Crow Era. The play is set in the early 1900s, a period shortly after the birth of modern boxing, when the sport moved from its illegal bareknuckle origins to a regulated and sanctioned gloved contest. Based loosely on the story of Jack Johnson, the first Black boxer to become heavyweight champion of the gloved era, *The Royale* is a story of confronting injustice, of overcoming odds, and of an individual’s pursuit of legacy. The opening three scenes introduce the audience to Jay, his trainer Wynton, promoter Max, and his opponent turned sparring partner and friend Fish. These scenes successfully establish the real-world history of early 1900s boxing; one plagued with racial divisions, where notable white heavyweight champions refused to cross the “color line” to fight Black contenders. The play succinctly articulates the importance of modern boxing to notions of national identity and racial superiority, where the boxing body of the heavyweight champion *of the world* represents more than just the sum of its parts, symbolizing the ideals and values of the nation-state. Over the course of the first three scenes, Ramirez demonstrates the perceived threat posed by Jay’s individuated Black body and his pursuit of a title fight with the retired white heavyweight champion. For Jay, his drive “Ain’t about bein’ no Heavyweight Champion of the *White* world. It’s about bein’ Champion, period”.⁹ Through a simulated press junket tour to announce the title, Jay is reminded that the activity inside the ring spills out into the public arena,

with Black and white Americans fighting over the idea that Jay may become the first Black heavyweight champion. Jay is also informed of threats made on his life, by armed white supremacists. Scenes four to six focus on the night of the championship fight, covering Jay's preparations in the locker room and the fight itself. Throughout the course of the play, Rameriz demonstrates how, in striving for a future as the champion, Jay is running away from a mysterious past. This is evidenced during the press conference, in scene three, where Jay is pressed but remains vague and elusive about his history and backstory; and established at the end of scene two when Jay, alone in his locker room, is confronted by an apparition.

A SILHOUETTE lingering almost offstage –

A WOMAN? A HAT?

JAY stares at her.

[...]

A tense beat, like he's locked eyes with a ghost, and finally –

She exits as well.

JAY takes another breath, trying to recover –

But he can't.¹⁰

In scenes five and six Jay is confronted with his past. This confrontation occurs through the spectral and literal appearance of his sister, Nina, the ghost-like figure of scene two, who visits Jay's locker room in scene five before figuratively replacing the champion, Bixby, to fight Jay in

the final scene of the play. It is Nina's presence, figuratively, inside the boxing ring in the final scene that demonstrates the potency of Ramirez's theatrical heterotopia.

Theatrical heterotopia

The application of heterotopia as a theoretical reading strategy brings into focus alternate orderings, making the otherwise invisible visible. Tompkins' methodology for analyzing heterotopia (her heterotopology), is a three-stage system, exploring the constructed space, the abstracted space, and the heterotopia. For Tompkins, a theatrical heterotopia 'resides between—or somehow in relation to' the two locations of the *constructed space* and the *abstracted space*.¹¹

The constructed space addresses the spatial environment encountered by the performers and audience at the start of the theatrical production. The abstracted space is a contrasting spatial environment that may be rendered in a geographically located place or may encompass more abstract qualities, such as a state of mind and the dramatic fiction. As Tompkins argues, it is through this configuration that an alternate ordering of the real world is realized, providing audiences with "a hint or inkling of another world, even one that is otherwise invisible."¹² The constructed space in *The Royale* is that of championship boxing during the Jim Crow Era, which is established through the aesthetic choices of the set design and costume, just as much as the spoken text. The abstracted space is that of the post-emancipation period of the early twentieth-century United States. The heterotopia is the boxing ring, where the narrative resources of boxing, those built upon the concepts of loneliness and isolation, collide with the wider socio-political plight of Black Americans through the ascendance of the first Black heavyweight champion. It is Nina's ghost-like presence that explicitly marks the space of the ring as both other and heterotopic while challenging the dominant narrative resources of the sport to provide a counter-experience.

Foucault defines heterotopias as “something like counter-sites,” places “outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.”¹³ But as James Faubion cautions, heterotopias cannot be considered heterotopian “simply because one experiences them as utterly different, as arenas of the transmogrification or transcendence of that from which they differ.”¹⁴ Nor are heterotopias simply figments of the imagination, they are “concrete technologies.”¹⁵ The ability to identify and analyze heterotopias in performance, what Hye Jean Chung refers to as a heterotopic perception, “allows spectators to perceive and interpret disjunctures between rhetoric and reality.”¹⁶ The heterotopia in *The Royale* demonstrates this disjuncture through the presentation of moments of multiple spatiotemporal connections. Indeed, this is the concrete technology of Ramirez’s heterotopia.

In Ameera Conrad’s production, three wooden platforms placed between seating banks arranged in traverse form represented spaces of controlled access and egress, such as the boxing gym, the changing room, press conferences, and the boxing ring. During the enactment of boxing bouts, the actors address the audience rather than each other and were lit through tightly focused pin spots. The staging successfully presented the boxing ring as a space apart, isolated, and distant, as demonstrated in the opening scene:

*(DING-DING-DING! Lights SHIFT. Sharper PINSPOTS on JAY and FISH. They stare straight forward, not at each other. What follows is more a stream-of-consciousness indication of what goes on inside their heads than a depiction of the fight itself.)*¹⁷

The theme of loneliness and isolation is further propagated through the spoken text, as demonstrated by Wynton’s counsel of Jay ahead of the championship bout:

But when you go into that ring, son,
You go *alone*.

...

Always have.

...

I might *be* there,

You might see me on the other side of those ropes,

But the two men throwin' punches?

Trust me, I know –

...

They're a million miles away.

[...]

You do it alone.¹⁸

The constructed space within *The Royale* draws upon the narrative resources of boxing to articulate the expected experience and functionality of boxing space. This speaks to the aforementioned bleed between boxing texts, that is, between actual boxing bouts and fictional representations. Boxing journalist, Katherine Dunn, states that, “[e]very boxer steps into the ring alone and succeeds or fails in his [*sic*] own right. It is not a team sport.”¹⁹ For Dunn, boxing is an individual pursuit, and to enter the ring is to embrace a degree of loneliness. This understanding is echoed by boxers, trainers, journalists, and academics alike, to such an extent that concepts of individualism and loneliness become part of the public narrative of boxing. For boxing journalist Budd Schulberg, boxers are alone, naked, and exposed from the minute the bell rings.²⁰ The moment the bell sounds, according to Muhammad Ali’s boxing trainer, Angelo Dundee, the fighter is “on his own, out there in the loneliest spot in the world, the center of the ring, just him, the other guy, and the ref.”²¹ Dunn, Schulberg, and Dundee suggest that loneliness is facilitated through the sport’s rituals of opening up and closing off the space, marked by stepping through the ropes and the ringing of the bell. These rituals enact a metaphysical transformation of space

for the boxer, marking an alternate ordering between the space inside the boxing ring and the space beyond the ropes. This expected embodied experience of isolation within the ring bleeds into the ways in which boxing is presented on the contemporary stage. However, the heterotopia of the ring in *The Royale* demonstrates that a transformative experience does indeed take place within this specific space, but importantly, the alternate ordering here is not one of figurative distance but one of connection.

While Ramirez works with isolation by physically isolating the fighters side-by-side and in separate pinspots, it is evident that Jay is afforded opportunities to forge connections beyond the ropes and the closed world of the heterotopia. In scene one, when Jay turns to address the crowd the space inside and beyond the ropes coalesce—but only for Jay. His opponent, Fish, can only exist inside the world of the constructed space of the ring.

JAY: You see that front row?

(CLAP.)

JAY (*Cont'd.*): Naw,

'Course you don't,

You don't see nothin',

Not right now,

All you see is this –

(- JAY DELIVERS a combination -)²²

Jay's heterotopia embraces Foucault's third principle of heterotopias, insofar as "it juxtaposes in a single real place several spaces, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible."²³

Additionally, Jay's heterotopia demonstrates Foucault's fourth principle, that of

heterochronisms—a slice of time which the inhabitants of the heterotopia experience as an

absolute break with traditional time. In scene six, Jay faces Champ Bixby for the title fight, but, as the stage directions indicate:

(BOOM.

And a PINSPOT SUDDENLY UP on the boxer - but it's not

Champ Bixby.

No.

It's NINA.

She stands strong.

JAY recognizes her. Is he dreaming?)

Having visited Jay's changing room to warn him of the dangers for Black Americans if he beats Champ Bixby in scene five, Nina leaves on a train home before the fight commences in scene six. In regard to the stage time of the play, Nina is physically on a train back home to Creek County, Oklahoma when the championship bout commences. Her presence in the ring enacts a cross-spatiotemporal disruption that challenges the narrative resources of boxing and enables the presentation of multiple socio-political possibilities for Jay.

NINA: Me? I'm on a train -

WYNTON: You wear *him* down -

NINA: Goin' home fast as I can, 'cause I know what's comin' -

JAY: *What's comin'?*

[...]

In Memphis, there's a pistol -

WYNTON: Finish this -

NINA: Kansas City man,

Tool shed,

Walkin' out with a rope, tyin' a knot like his daddy taught him,

And I know you don't care 'bout that -

WYNTON: *Now*, Jay -

NINA: But somewhere *close*, there's a hand on a knife -²⁴

Nina's presence in the ring marks a heterotopic moment, through which the ring as heterotopia embraces a system of opening and closing on account of the cross-temporal and cross-spatial slippage. Nina's presence separates Jay from the experience of fighting the champ. His experience of the *here* and *now*, is disrupted through his connection to the *now* and *there* of Nina on the train back home, the *then* and *there* of his childhood memories, and the projected and possible realities and futures playing out in other times and other places on account of his actions within the ring. The heterotopia of the ring functions to connect Jay with his past, his present, and possible futures. Here, Nina's ghost-like presence serves to both warn Jay of anticipated violence and to connect him to actual acts of racial violence. In the climatic moments of the play, as Jay triumphs to become the new heavyweight champion, Nina acts as a medium, connecting Jay to the spatiotemporality experienced by his training partner Fish, who is listening to the fight on a radio in a bar. It is within the heterotopia of the ring Jay learns that Fish was stabbed by a white male in reaction to the result of the bout.

Within *The Royale*, heterotopia functions to demonstrate connection between boxing bodies inside a ring with the sociopolitical realities beyond the ropes. The character of Nina disrupts any sense of linear time and challenges the rigidity and separation of geographical spaces. As a theatrical manifestation of alternate ordering, the ghost-like presence of Nina makes explicit the

possibility for a boxer's experience inside of the ring to be understood as one of cross-temporal slippage. This is a significantly different and important way of understanding boxing experience when it is ordinarily viewed through the fixed frames of reference of isolation and loneliness. The narrative link between isolation and the boxing ring serves as the quotidian reading of boxing experience and boxing space. The dominance of this storyline has the potential to silence, or render as inauthentic, non-quotidian experiences. In staging moments of connection Ramirez presents an alternative to the quotidian. This is a heterotopia that problematizes the narrative myths supporting the sport of boxing; making visible alternate narratives for embodied experience, that can increase the pool of storied resources that support individual identity projects. In challenging the narrative experience of being inside the boxing ring, Ramirez presents new and alternate stories. As Brett Smith and Andrew Sparkes assert, given that individuals live in and by stories, the ability to expand people's sense of who they are and who they could be, may be facilitated by multiplying the available narrative resources an individual has access to and feels a part of:

That is, the more stories a person has access to, the more flexibility and opportunities they may have to potentially live differently. Thus, narratives can do things in terms of limiting, constraining, and enabling who a person is and might become.²⁵

When a spatiotemporal analysis of heterotopia challenges quotidian narrative resources, there is possibility to make visible new and alternate narratives resources, which can lead to new and alternate ways in which people might experience and live their lives.

The projection of blackness

The potency of Ramirez's heterotopia resides in the presentation of alternate narrative resources. In line with Marc Anthony Neal's work, I argue that Jay's experience is that of an illegible Black male body, insofar as it rejects the projection of a polemic identity and refuses to serve as merely a tried and tested prop of a criminal body or a body in need of policing or containment.²⁶ In *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*, Harvey Young addresses the inherent violence in the projection of the idea of a singular Black body across actual bodies. Young acknowledges that although "black bodies vary, thus preventing them from having exactly the same experience, the similarities in how they are seen and see themselves constitutes a relatable experience of the body."²⁷ As Young stresses, these projections are crucial to the formation of Black critical memory, the shaping of social behavior or everyday performances, as well as determining the way in which, "black folk view the society in which they live and the people, including themselves, who populate it."²⁸ In shaping experience, these projections also shape narratives about Black bodies and Black experience. These narratives support and enact violence against individuated bodies. Through the heterotopia of the boxing ring, Jay pursues legibility on his terms and in opposition to prevailing tropes. The power of Ramirez's heterotopia, as marked by the cross-spatiotemporal connections afforded by Nina, is that the heterotopia does not present a utopic alternate ordering. Rather, it presents the complexities, nuances, and challenges faced by a desire to be read as legible. Neal's legible and illegible Black body aligns with Young's notion of the closed loop of blackness, where individuated bodily experience is repetitively overridden by the violence of a projected Black experience. Young turns to habitus as a process of referential performance, where the body is "socially constructed and continually constructs its own self," as a means through which the projected tropes of the legible body are challenged and the closed loop of Blackness is escaped.²⁹

By providing alternate narrative resources about the experience of being a boxing body inside the ring, *The Royale* presents additional narrative possibilities.

Extending Stuart Hall's concept of the multiplicity of identities, I argue that the development of additional narrative resources facilitates a multiplicity of narrative identities.³⁰ This is important because boxing, and sport more generally, create limited narrative resources for Black bodies. As demonstrated by Sarah Crews and myself in *Boxing and Performance*, the narrative resources of boxing are closely linked to the narrative resources of modernity.³¹ Here, Black bodies are understood through a limited set of problematic resources, closely linked to frameworks that understand identities and experience through the lens of developmental theory, where Black boxing bodies are understood as docile and disciplined or monstrous and savage. Ethnographic projects on boxing address the myriad ways in which Black boxing bodies are exploited by a sport that has a carnal appreciation for their labor as an "endangered bodily capital."³² In addition to the narratives born not of modernity projects, boxing bodies, particularly Black professional boxing bodies are understood, as subject to exploitation. As Loïc Wacquant argues, boxers have a consciousness of exploitation which manifests in their narrative resources through the idioms of "*prostitution, slavery and animal husbandry* [which] simultaneously enounce and denounce the immoral, indeed inhumane, merchandising of disquieting live bodies."³³ The argument here is that a boxer's experience within the ring, if understood in a more nuanced manner, provides opportunities to witness possible connections and a personal reparative dimension to the sport that emerges through practice.

Conclusion

It was the sociologist Margaret Somers who first coined the term narrative identity.³⁴ For Somers, stories guide action and people construct their identities by “locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories.”³⁵ Further:

[P]eople are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives.³⁶

To avoid the violence of the projection of experience or a particular narrative identity onto individuated bodies, individuals need access to a greater repertoire of social, public, and cultural narratives. Individuals need resources that enable them to narrate their bodies, their experiences, and thus their identities as legible. This occurs not by blindly accepting and adopting the dominant and often violent or oppressive storied resources that speak *for* bodies and experiences, but by identifying instances where alternate narrative resources are presented and critically examining these resources to better understand their impact and significance. Because fictional depictions of boxing experience, such as *The Royale*, contribute to the texts on boxing from which the repertoire of emplotted stories are drawn, there is significant value in examining the types of boxing stories that are staged. The boundaries between fictional and non-fictional representations of the sport are much more porous and permeable than one might initially wish to believe. The storied resources found in the range of boxing texts operate in a multidirectional manner, that is, it is not simply that non-fictional representations of the sport inform, for instance, theatrical or cinematic representations. Rather, representation and resources bleed across boundaries; stories seep and mix to form the foundations of the ontological and public narratives of the sport.

A methodology of theatrical heterotopia seeks to identify the potency of the reconfiguration of spatial ordering. But, as narrativity demands that an individual's experience is discerned through the temporal and spatial relationships of storylines, for a theatrical heterotopia to have true potency, it is necessary to build upon Tompkins's initial framework and respond with a heterotopic analysis "that places much more attention on the communicating capacity of time in relation to spatiality."³⁷ Within *The Royale*, it is only when the spatiotemporal ordering of the experience of being inside the ring is analyzed that it is possible to gain a sense of the heterotopias potential to affect social change. The heterotopia of the ring operates opening and closing mechanisms, creating actual and figurative spatiotemporal distance from the world beyond the ropes, permitting an escape from the distractions of the quotidian space of the auditorium. Similarly, the staging of the scenes inside the ring deploys techniques which further the actual and implied distance experienced by the fighters. These techniques separate the fighters from one another and further isolate them within the space of the ring, bringing the theme of loneliness to the fore. However, inside the ring, in *The Royale*, Jay finds escape from his spatiotemporal settings, connecting with alternate and abnormal spatiotemporal realities. The manner in which heterotopia operates within Marco Ramirez's *The Royale* does not completely obliterate the narrative trope of loneliness. Nor does it obliterate how the idea of *the* Black body is projected across the individuated body. Ramirez's *The Royale* is an example of heterotopic theatre that "stops short of providing answers, instead raising alternatives to the status quo that may have traction in the actual world."³⁸ Within the heterotopia of the boxing ring quotidian narratives are problematized.

By invoking the ghost-like figure of Nina, Ramirez's heterotopia alters the experience of being in time, facilitating a coalescence of disparate spatiotemporal orderings. Here, Nina as specter

inserts strangeness into the understanding of how boxing space is experienced, and thus demanding greater critical examination for what might otherwise be considered understood as uniform through the various boxing texts. If, following Avery's reading of ghosts, the specter is a symptom of what is missing and a representation of loss, then Ramirez's heterotopia works on multiple levels. It makes visible the otherwise poorly understood world of boxing experience and of being in a ring, providing additional narrative resources to help boxers live different storied lives. But it also brings into focus questions of what it might mean to be a legible or illegible body, specifically a Black body. Nina's ghost-like presence serves as both a frightening and confrontational reminder of the violence and oppression projected onto the experience of individuated Black bodies and as a catalyst through which Jay can express his desire for an alternate ordering. In confessing his motivation for becoming heavyweight champion, Jay tells of a formative memory when, as a young boy he found Nina had badly burnt her hair and skin as she attempted to straighten her hair to better resemble the white models in pharmaceutical adverts.

JAY: But every punch I ever threw,
Every punch I ever took.

...

I'm just tryin' to fix that.

...

I'm still tryin' to tell you -

...

I'ma make it right.

...

*I'ma change things.*³⁹

It is only through the cross-spatiotemporal disordering within the heterotopia of the ring that this articulation for representation and legibility is made evident. Nina as ghost challenges the narratives of loneliness and isolation to provide Jay with a form of connection within the ring. But the connection afforded by Nina is more powerful and potent than simply providing Jay with an escape from the realities of the immediate combat. The connection is heavy and complicated, providing Jay with the opportunity to imagine living differently whilst bringing into focus the potential difficulties faced by laying claim to an alternate ordering and reimagined future. Nina's spectral presence within the boxing ring functions according to Avery Gordon's understanding of a ghost, insofar as she acts as a seething presence altering the experience of being in time, reordering the experience of the past, present, and future.⁴⁰

The boxing ring is a paradoxical space. On the one hand, it may close in on its boxer occupants to produce feelings of isolation and loneliness. Yet, simultaneously, it can provide temporal, sensorial, and spatial openings which disturb isolating boundaries by producing networks of connections. To return to Norman Mailer, the example from *The Royale* demonstrates that the experience of being in the boxing ring has the potential to be considerably different from what might otherwise be believed. It is much more intense and complex than simply being a space apart that distances and isolates the lone boxer. The boxing ring is a space within which individuals craft identities, make claims for representation and to be read as legitimate. By challenging the narrative myths of isolation and loneliness, a heterotopic analysis of the staged boxing ring makes visible alternate narratives and increases the pool of available narrative resources. In addition to increasing the narrative resources available to make sense of the experience of boxing, the heterotopia within *The Royale*, disrupts quotidian narratives about embodied Black experience. Here, Jay enacts a cross-spatiotemporal connection gaining access

to narrative resources that enables him to challenge and resist the violent projection of Blackness across his individuated body. Rather than being trapped in a closed loop of Blackness, Jay is able to demonstrate agency, striving for a future that is not divorced from his past experiences, but is certainly not held back by them. To understand the spatiotemporal dynamics of the boxing ring as heterotopia in *The Royale*, is to understand how theatrical heterotopias can be marked as potent when they present alternate narrative resources through which narrative identity can be crafted and quotidian ways of narrating experience and bodies can be challenged.

¹ James D. Faubion, "Heterotopia: An Ecology," in *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, eds. Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), 31.

² See Kath Woodward, "Hanging Out and Hanging About: Insider/Outsider Research in the Sport of Boxing," *Ethnography* 9, no. 4 (2008): 536–61.

³ Brett Smith and Andrew C. Sparkes, "Contrasting Perspectives on Narrating Selves and Identities: An Invitation to Dialogue," *Qualitative Research* 8 (2008): 5.

⁴ Informing the analysis are the live performances of *The Royale* witnessed by the author at the Bush Theatre, London, UK in 2015, and at Milton Court Studio Theatre, London, UK in 2020. For purposes of clarity, this chapter focuses on Ameera Conrad's staging in 2020.

⁵ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and The Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁶ Joanne Tompkins, *Theatre's Heterotopias: Performance and the Cultural Politics of Space* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 178.

⁷ See Sarah Crews and Solomon Lennox, *Boxing and Performance: Memetic Hauntings* (London: Routledge, 2021).

⁸ Norman Mailer, "Existential Aesthetics," in *Pontifications* (Boston: Little, 1982), 83. Quoted in Christian K. Messenger, "Norman Mailer: Boxing and the Art of his Narrative" *Modern Fiction Studies* 33, no. 1 (1987): 88.

⁹ Marco Ramirez, *The Royale* (London: Oberon Modern Plays, 2016), 53.

¹⁰ Ramirez, *The Royale*, 46.

¹¹ Tompkins, *Theatre's Heterotopias*, 42.

¹² Tompkins, *Theatre's Heterotopias*, 6.

¹³ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 24.

¹⁴ James D. Faubion, "Heterotopia: An Ecology," 33.

¹⁵ Faubion, "Heterotopia," 33.

¹⁶ Hye Jean Chung, *Media Heterotopias: Digital Effects and Material Labor in Global Film Production* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 3.

¹⁷ Ramirez, *The Royale*, 11.

¹⁸ Ramirez, *The Royale*, 87–88.

¹⁹ Katherine Dunn, "School of Hard Knocks," in *Shadow Boxers: Sweat, Sacrifice & the Will to Survive in American Boxing Gyms*, ed. John Gattuso, (Milford, NJ: Stone Creek Publications, 2005), 38.

²⁰ Budd Schulberg, *Ringside: A Treasury of Boxing Reportage* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2009), 156. For the prominence of this notion, that boxers are alone from the minute the bell rings, see Jimmy Cannon, "You're Joe Louis" in *The Greatest Boxing Stories Ever Told: Thirty-Six Incredible Tales from the Ring*, ed. Jeff Silverman (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2002), 194.

²¹ Angelo Dundee and Bert Randolph Sugar, *My View from the Corner: A Life in Boxing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 300.

²² Ramirez, *The Royale*, 20.

²³ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, eds. Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), 19.

-
- ²⁴ Ramirez, *The Royale*, 110–14.
- ²⁵ Brett Smith and Andrew C. Sparkes, “Narrative Inquiry in Sport and Exercise Psychology: What Can it Mean, and Why Might We Do It?” *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 10 (2009): 3.
- ²⁶ Marc Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).
- ²⁷ Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 14.
- ²⁸ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 5.
- ²⁹ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 20.
- ³⁰ See Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996), 89.
- ³¹ Sarah Crews and P. Solomon Lennox, *Boxing and Performance* (London: Routledge, 2020).
- ³² Loïc Wacquant, “Whores, Slaves, and Stallions: Languages of Exploitation and Accommodation among Boxers,” in *Commodifying Bodies*, eds. Nanch Scheper-Hughes and Loïc Wacquant (London: Sage, 2001), 185.
- ³³ Wacquant, “Whores, Slaves, and Stallions,” 182.
- ³⁴ Margaret R. Somers, “The Narrative Construction of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach,” *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (1994): 605–49.
- ³⁵ Somers, “The Narrative Construction of Identity,” 619.
- ³⁶ Somers, “The Narrative Construction of Identity,” 619.
- ³⁷ Tompkins, *Theatre’s Heterotopias*, 178.
- ³⁸ Tompkins, *Theatre’s Heterotopias*, 180.
- ³⁹ Ramirez, *The Royale*, 109.
- ⁴⁰ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*.