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Hoop It Up, Loop It Back, Repeat: A Decade of Memory and Interconnectivity at a Johannesburg Basketball Court

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HOOP IT UP, LOOP IT BACK, REPEAT

A DECADE OF MEMORY AND INTERCONNECTIVITY AT A JOHANNESBURG BASKETBALL COURT

ALEXANDRA CUNNINGHAM

Plagiarism Declaration Page

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Wits School of the Arts
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I declare this research report as my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Arts by research in the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been previously published or submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

Supervisors : Dorothee Kreutzfeldt and Gabrielle Goliath
Date Submitted: 12 September 2022
Ethics Clearance Number: H20/07/09

Signature:  Date: 12 September 2022

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CONTRIBUTORS



Marks "Gunz" Mhlanga



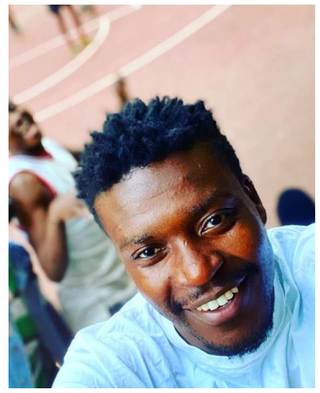
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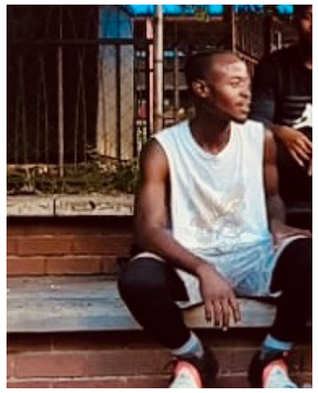
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PREFACE

I Got Worldwide Family All Over the Earth: Positionality

In the process of creating this body of work and dissertation, I have been challenged to explore the complexities of who I am as a part of my community at a public basketball half-court in inner-city Johannesburg. My positionality within this space is layered and in constant flux. Ultimately, this research and artmaking has become a way to explore and wrestle with this complexity. The court is a porous physical space occupied by a community of people who are not originally from Johannesburg, constantly moving in and out, adapting while also expressing differences. Creating artworks afforded me a new window through which to explore the textures of my experiences and environment in a way that written language is unable to do. I entered this process with ideas around being an *insider* or an *outsider* at our court, but as I attempted to navigate this through my artmaking, these delineations became far more complicated.

At surface level, one may see and hear differences amongst myself and others at the court, markers of my identity that undeniably exist: white, American, female. Yet this court is made up of others with vast differences that may not be as obvious. The majority of us originate from other countries and cultures, varying ages and classes, with personal identities that diverge from the expected and intertwine together through the sport of basketball into something beautifully complex, woven and precarious. Our community's layers of difference and sameness over the past decade have confronted these entanglements and pushed beyond them into an interpersonal ecosystem that plays itself out in the game and culture of basketball. In this dissertation I navigate these dynamics and relationships using poetic descriptions of the court, music we listen to, dialogue amongst court community members, elements of the sport and images of crocheted, woven and looped materials.

My life as an artist and academic had always existed separately from basketball until I began this Masters degree in early 2020. Overlapping these worlds has been a challenge and one I have tried to meet in a way that feels real to my experiences and inclusive of us as a community, a family.

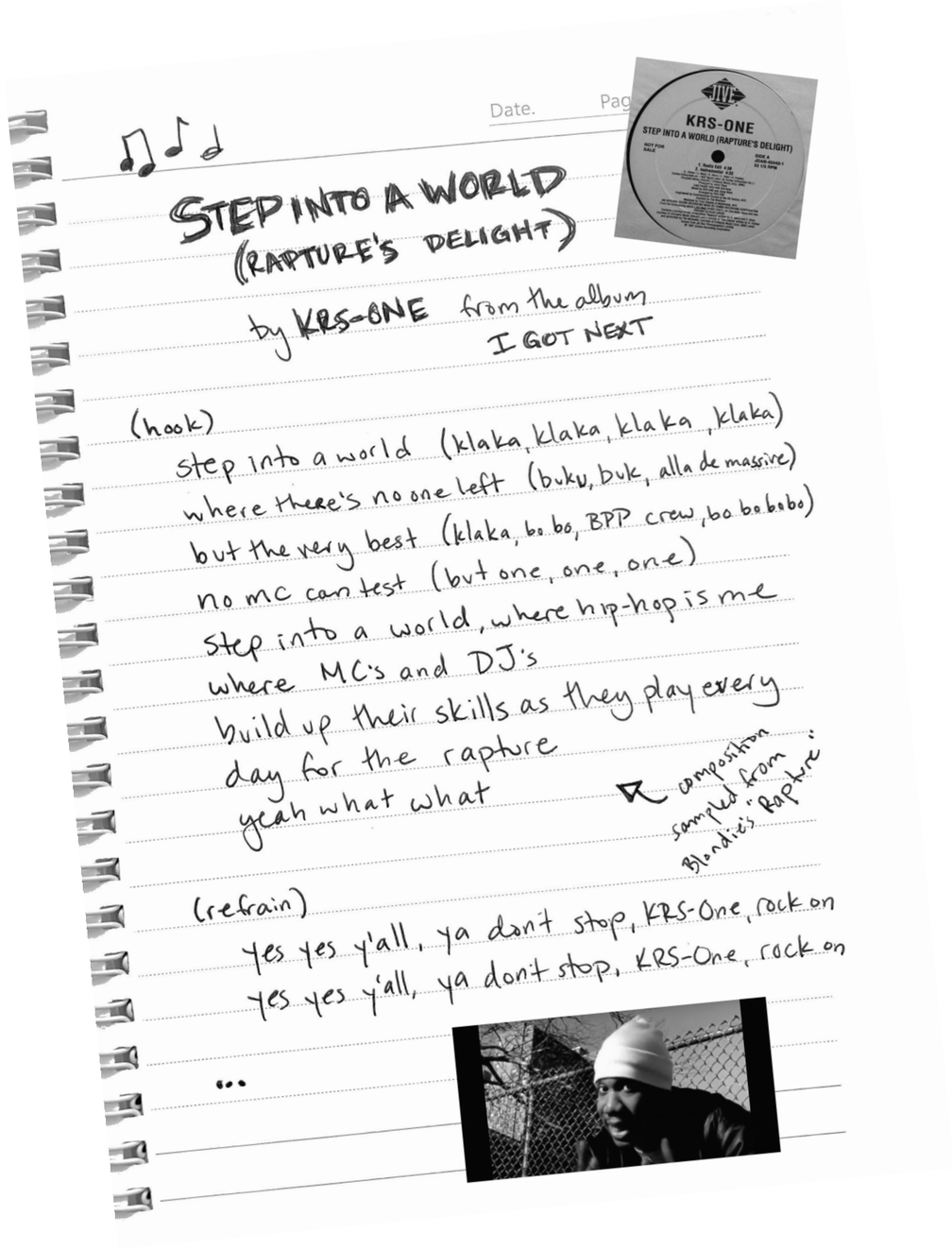
This positionality frames my methodological approach: partially autoethnographic, but with the core, guiding elements being casual conversations between myself and others from the court, offering a window to our world. It is essential that the voices in this work are not solely mine. At the same time, the conversations were initiated by me and include my voice and presence, so the dialogue is never fully without relation to my positionality within our community. I reflect upon these discussions, many of which are reminiscent of past experiences and recount how the court has grown and changed. Our conversations feature prominently, and all contributors are named and credited.

In these conversations, I pursue topics that speak to how our court community has become so intertwined, centring on my personal experience. I bring up themes of belonging, support, care, conflict and vulnerability, occasionally noting and questioning how my points of difference in race and gender might have been at play within our community dynamics. My fellow contributors engage in these topics often dismissively, but also with an acknowledgment of their influence on our relationships. Femininity emerges as an important facet of my role within (and adjacent to) the community, and is further explored in Chapter Four. This dissertation is an effort to bring my voice and views together with the views and voices of our broader court community. At times, this exploration in my artmaking and writing exposes the tensions that exist.

My artwork and writing are framed by hip-hop music: I selected each song from a collection of titles I gathered by asking our community what music came to mind when thinking about the court. The track referenced in the title of this preface: "I Got Worldwide Family All Over the Earth" communicates our diasporic community and comes from "Worst Comes to Worst" by Dilated Peoples, also referenced in the Conclusion of this writing. Most of us arrived at the court from outside of Johannesburg and many have also left. Our movements may only intersect for brief moments within the court space itself, but the bonds we have formed have been proven to hold across borders and bodies of water.

In navigating the interpersonal, this work has revealed the intertwining, unravelling and rebuilding of our community over the past decade. Artistically it explores the way in which materials can express interaction, support and precarity. Within the context of urban studies and Johannesburg, these reflections present an insight into the social interactions that unfold within the spatial constructs of a public basketball court. It is its own mini world within the inner-city, at times a representative microcosm of its context, yet at other times something fleeting, magical and apart from the dynamics that surround. I welcome you into a piece of our world, as experienced by myself with the contributors to this work.

STEP INTO A WORLD: THE COURT



Author's handwritten & collaged reference to "Step Into a World (Rapture's Delight)" by KRS-One (KRS-One, 1997b)
Listen: Step Into A World (Rapture's Delight) by KRS-One

Step Into A World: The Court

The criss-crossing of the chain link, cold metal, bent yet rigid, creating a pattern, a mesh that triggers nostalgic memories: for some of a far off place, for others of realities in their youth. It surrounds the court, reaching up over six metres, with just one opening to enter the space. And once you pass through, you have entered a new world.

This new world is the court. Back in the day, when we went to the full court near Park Station from time to time, and would take taxis up to play at Zoo Lake on the weekends, we called it the half court. But generally speaking, it is the court. Where to find someone? The court. When to talk about something? The court. How to settle a disagreement? The court. The ball never lies.

Formally speaking, it is the basketball court at Ernest Oppenheimer Park in the Johannesburg inner city. It was added as part of the redevelopment of the park in 2010 by the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) alongside a new linear outdoor market behind the old post office.

For many of us, myself included, the court has become a way to understand the larger world and ourselves. The people we connect with through this place become core and consistent interactions in the midst of the rest of our lives (for me, my most consistent over the past decade). The court is the backdrop to a chosen family full of memories and history.

Alex: I think I wanna just start by saying, or asking, tell me about the court?

Mawere: I would say it's an amazing place, it's a place where you, say you're stressed, and you get to the court, and you like, you don't think of anything else, you just think of basketball. It's like a home.

Mike: It's a de-stress area.

Mawere: It's like a second home. A home away from home. You know, like you have another family there, besides your biological family. That's how I would describe the court. So it's something, I would say home away from home.

Mike: To me it's like something I can't live without. You know, because you know at some point you get to that time when you're like, you're at work and you just think, ay, here I'm done, I gotta go. It's about time.

Mawere: It's about time.

Mike: It's five o'clock.

Mawere: It's five o'clock.

Mike: When it gets to three o'clock you'll be stressed, you'll be like you want to go to the court. Whether you're working or you're doing what, you want to go to the court, because you-

Mawere: If you don't for a day-

Mike: For a day, yeah you feel like something's missing.

Conversation amongst Alex, Mike, Mawere and Chrispen
19 September 2020, at Alex's flat in Johannesburg
(Chawa, Chawa & Mawere, 2020)

The court exists as a physical space: a frame in which there is tangible infrastructure built up to indicate the kind of activity meant to take place there. In a way, that makes the space sacred to those of us who play basketball, who seek out such spaces which are limited in Johannesburg[1]. But this research is not focused on the physical space, rather it is interested in the energy and relationships flowing amongst the people within the space. The links and connections that have been built are influenced by not only the space, but also the game and the culture of basketball. The hoop, the benches, the rules, the music, the sun, the ball, the shoes, the lighting, the lines, the water, the weed, the sweat, the beers: each element present in the space affects how we relate to one another and what grows and builds out of this separate world that we have made for ourselves.

At this particular court, most people who play or are a part of our community come from outside of Johannesburg. I arrived from the United States, others had immigrated from other African countries including Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Tanzania, as well as South Africans from other provinces, townships and suburbs. In Benedict Anderson's work on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, he discusses the idea of migration as a way to form bonds, designating "the 'journey' between times, statuses and places as a meaning-creating experience" (2016, p. 53). This commonality of migrancy is perhaps part of what has made many of us closer than just passing acquaintances - each of us detached from a former belonging and seeking a new sense of home. I first arrived at the court in 2011, the year following its construction. Now, 2022, over a decade later, there have been various iterations of the court "family" with people coming and going, and a handful of us still around from the start.

Our interactions and flows echo a story by Italo Calvino called "Trading Cities" in which he describes a nomadic society: "In Ersilia, to establish the relationships that sustain the city's life, the inhabitants stretch strings from the corners of the houses, white or black or gray or black-and-white according to whether they mark a relationship of blood, of trade, authority, agency" (2012, p. 123). Such dynamics of connection and bonds (made visible by Calvino's invention of Ersilia) are what root the people at the court in something much more complex than the space or the sport of basketball. The relationships we experience include those of friendships, mentorships, business collaborations, romantic relationships and so much more. Calvino continues the story: "When the strings become so numerous that you can no longer pass among them, the inhabitants leave: the houses are dismantled; only the strings and their supports remain" (2012, p. 123). The court may stay in its same physical space, but the relationships that hold it together have been broken down and built back up many times over the past decade - perhaps due to these invisible "strings" becoming too dense for us to pass through and build upon. This magical, separate world set apart from the rest of the city by a chain link threshold at times is not so magical and falls back into an unremarkable space that is no longer so far apart and distinct from the rest of the city.

1 Basketball is not a prominent sport in South Africa, and it can be challenging to find public courts at which to play.

2 I have many collected photos from over the years in various folders on my computer - from WhatsApps, USBs passed around amongst our community and my own images. It is likely that I am the photographer as I am not in the image, but it is possible that it could have been taken by Gunz or another community member.



The fence from within the court, pick-up game[2], photographer unknown, 2012 (Court, 2012)

Alex: And home - you still think of Joburg as home?

Gunz: Yes. Especially the basketball court... that's home to me because a lot of things happened there. Family, got to know other people's cultures and stuff like that, so to me, yeah it's home.

Alex: When you say family what do you mean?

Gunz: My family, I got to know people from, like you, the guys from Congo, from all parts of the world. Yeah I didn't- I only knew my culture so I got to know a lot of different cultures and how people are. Yeah, so it was comfortable.

Conversation between Alex and Gunz
6 September 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Amsterdam
(Mhlanga, 2020)

My research and practice reflect upon these remnants and memories: the elements that may be unknown to those within the space now, yet that serve as the foundations for the court to come. Calvino ends the story: "Thus, when traveling in the territory of Ersilia, you come upon the ruins of the abandoned cities, without the walls which do not last, without the bones of the dead which the wind rolls away: spider-webs of intricate relationships seeking a form" (2012, p. 123). These "spider-webs" of relationships still exist in the court space and they rebuild and retwine with new people - people who are not even aware of the memories of the past: the walls that have not lasted.

Sara Ahmed and Anne-Marie Fortier challenge Anderson's theories on the development of communities in *Re-imagining Communities* which seeks to be "a critical intervention into our understandings of community, conceived not as a resolution, nor as a seamless, conflict-free zone shaped along the familial models of intimacy and love" (2003, p. 257). While many of my memories of the court include a strong sense of family and strength, ultimately these bonds are unresolved, continually breaking down and building up. Strong memories of love and togetherness often precede those of abandonment and uncertainty. People come and go, alliances and goals shift, we all collectively strive to attain the idea of community, continually falling short. Nonetheless, what characterises the strength in our group is the consistency in trying: persistently seeking out connection.

Throughout this research, "we" will refer to this group of people who have played at the court over the past decade, myself included. Individuals within this group, to varying degrees, have become a family to me[3]. We have come and gone over the years, some play more often than others, some from smaller circles of close friends, some only spent time at the court for a year or two and some have been there all along. This family, as in all families, has complex dynamics and occasionally toxic relationships. There are layers of societal norms and expectations as well as events that cause upheaval and chaos. There is also love and comradery, a sense of mutual understanding and common ground and ultimately a safety net (though at times weak or withheld). I view myself within the court in this way, part of a dysfunctional, loving family. This family at the court has shaped my understanding of my identity and self-expression as well as my perception of the society that surrounds me.

This research explores the energy and relationships flowing amongst the people within the court space over the past decade. I reflect upon the following core questions:

What draws a person to the court and in what ways do individuals *step into*, *step up within*, and *step out* of the community?

How has the routine and ritual of basketball (the game and culture) allowed me and others to find meaningful connections?

How have the individuals at the court become "family" to one another and what then does this mean about the concept of family?

3 The individuals that make up this group are each important persons within the whole "we." Due to challenges with immigration, justice systems and other complex social dynamics, many individuals will remain anonymous and not described in detail unless I have gained explicit consent to include their names in this research.





Left and Above: 'Step Into A World,' detail of artwork by Alexandra Cunningham, photographs by Sizakele Angel Khumalo (Cunningham, 2022b)

I explore these questions through my conversations with court community members and music that we associate with the court's basketball culture. I also artistically interpret these questions through my body of work reflecting upon our interpersonal dynamics and the court infrastructure that engenders those dynamics. I reflect upon and respond to contemporary artists and scholars' observations on the shaping of identity, positionality and interconnectivity.

In my artistic body of work, crochet, linking and looping are suspended from hoops in a gallery space, evoking the intertwining, gentle nature of our relationships. "Step Into a World" is an installation work that acts as a threshold upon entering the gallery space, mimicking the fence at the court and also reminiscent of a net. The work is accompanied by the intro and outro audio of KRS-One's "Step Into a World (Rapture's Delight)," the track presented at the start of this section: its chilling, high-pitched sound setting the tone for entering into the exhibition space. The music video for this track includes scenes of KRS-One outside of a chain-link fence, a motif in basketball and hip hop culture that I kept in mind while creating the work. Crochet and embroidery are woven within the spaces of the "fence," constructing formal shapes and lines that echo memories of interlocking and divergence. The piece confronts the viewer upon entry into the gallery forcing them to choose to move past it and enter the space as they would when passing through the fence at the court and stepping into a new world.

Rap and hip hop[4] music run parallel to the culture of basketball, particularly in its American-centric context. When I asked friends what tracks reminded them of the court, Ante Up by M.O.P., Worst Comes to Worst by Dilated Peoples, Play No Games by Rick Ross and many more in the 90s-00s American hip hop genre came up. These tracks often speak to community, crew and locale: this collective repped and defended like a family. Basketball and hip hop culture may be a consistent undertone at public courts around the world, but what lies through the chain link, past a threshold, partially obscured until you are inside, is something specific to its own space and context.

Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* elaborates on this idea of the crew or locale as a visualisation of hip hop style that serves to "affirm rap's primary thematic concerns: identity and location… rap video themes have repeatedly converged around the depiction of the local neighborhood and the local posse, crew or support system. Nothing is more central to rap's music video narratives than situating the rapper in his or her milieu and among one's crew or posse" (1994, pp. 9-10). At our court, one will see the common elements of basketball shoes, backpacks and jackets strewn across the seating, Coca-Cola and American hip hop music. Look closer and the elements of amakipkip and Black Label, the occasional interspersing of amapiano, dancehall or rumba, and language switching from English to isiZulu to Lingala to Shona every few minutes create a court space that is both familiar and distinct. Rose continues, "The hood is not a generic designation; videos… often capture the regional specificity of spatial, ethnic, temperate, and psychological facts of black marginality" (1994, pp. 10-11). While these scenes at many courts or music videos may seem similar, they are keenly unique.

4 Rap and hip hop at times are seen as the same genre, at other times separate. Rap refers more to the lyrical spoken element of hip hop music and hip hop as a term can refer to the larger cultural context including music, rap, dancing, graffiti, fashion, etc.



Court community members, 2021 (Crew, 2021)

Alex: And what- do you remember like, what made you come actually inside and sit down?

Skylah: The people! It's the people, the basketball players here are so welcoming, they're so loving. They're just, they make you feel at home away from home, you know? Yeah, they understand, like, family values and stuff. They make you feel comfortable, you know?

Alex: Yeah.

Skylah: They love everybody, you know these basketball players.

Alex: Yeah, it's true, it's true.

Conversation between Alex and Skylah
12 January 2022, at the court in Johannesburg
(Peterson, 2022)

Alex: You've mentioned a few times the fence, the chain link fence. It came up in a few different things that you said. Um, I wanted to know like why, why is that visual or that component of the space so significant to you?

Pule: To be honest, I think most of it has to got something to do with Hollywood. How blacktop basketball was, you know the old music videos, 90s hip hop, there was always a guy behind the fence you know, holding it, and sort of rapping through the fence kind of thing. Which is a, I think, you know in hindsight, I think some weird symbolism to being jailed, you know what I mean, behind bars kind of thing. And a lot of the rappers would use it in the music videos in New York. So you have, the camera is on the outside, looking through the fence. And there's the rapper on the fence and behind the rapper a couple of guys are playing basketball, you know what I mean? So that's where the fantasy element comes in. And at least from the location, what makes the location magical is that it can, it taps into your nostalgia, you know? And then if I'm to take it a step further, it's- it could be so many things. For example, Junior[5], I don't know what the hell he's up to over there, but he came into this very specifically perimetered area, in the fence, he was a different person, I'm sure. I could see this guy, this guy is trouble man, but he was somewhat calm there, do you know what I mean?

Alex: Yeah.

Pule: He was somewhat calm there, it was a safe little square block where everybody was safe and everybody was chilled, you know what I mean? And maybe the fence was representative of that. Maybe the fence was representative of the safe space and a world out there which is big and bad for some, which is neutral for some, which is pretty good for some. You know, you don't know what the people are going through.

Conversation between Alex and Pule
30 August 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Munich
(Mathebula, 2020)

5 Junior is not the real name of this individual

This separate world draws spectators, some pass through the threshold to observe from within, others stop and look through from the outside. One's location literally in or out of the fenced area is just one way to differentiate a literal insider and outsider, but the layers of complexity around one's relation to the court are often far more nuanced. The following memory highlights these tensions.

Alex: The time that we were all at the court and a group of tourists walk by, like mostly white people.

Gunz: I still have that in my head.

Alex: Yeah, and people take the photos. But then it was you and Mawere I think that took photos back of them.

Gunz: Nah, I was like, no man, it's been a while, people just passing through and taking pictures of us, I'm doing it, I'm taking pictures of them too. Then I started taking pictures of them, whatever they're seeing I'm seeing it with them too. If they're seeing us playing ball, I'm seeing them watching us playing ball. So I'm like, ok, yeah I'm returning the favour too. Let's see how they are going to feel if we take pictures of them. But yeah, they didn't take any offence, because they started laughing about it. Yeah, and then everyone was like ah yeah! Everyone started laughing about it. That's when Mawere started taking pictures also. Yeah it was just me, only fighting, you know me, I was just getting excited. So when I saw them taking pictures I was like, I'm doing the same thing.

Alex: Why-

Gunz: Too bad I didn't keep the pictures. But it would have been nice now, like oh you see this day?

Alex: Yeah, why do you think, like how did you feel at first when they were taking pictures?

Gunz: I felt a lot of things. But like I said I'm quick to overcome things, I always look in the positive way.

Alex: But what did you feel before you overcame?

Gunz: I was just like, what? They are just looking at black people playing basketball, like oh, look at them! Oh yeah, black people playing basketball! Yeah, at first, this was just something that came across me. Like, there's nothing to watch here, we're just playing basketball in the park. But then, right after I think that, then I was like ok, maybe they're just taking pictures because it's a beautiful scene, you know what I mean? Yeah people are playing basketball in the middle of CBD. Yeah it's something maybe to take a picture of? We are walking through the buildings and boom, there's people playing basketball right in the middle of the town. So I was like, oh ok, maybe I'm overthinking things, let them just pass. It doesn't harm me for someone to take a picture from where, yeah, with me I was just like, yeah it doesn't disturb me with anything. Ok cool, they can do whatever they want to do. So the next time when that happened, then I was like, ok let me see how they're going to feel. Then that's when I started taking pictures of them too. Yeah but they laughed about it. Because they were like old people passing through. So I felt like maybe they're just enjoying us running around playing ball. Then they're taking pictures like ah, look, to show other people somewhere where they stay, like, this is what happens right in the middle of the heart of Johannesburg. People are playing basketball in the middle of the town. Yeah, so, yeah, I like to look at things positively.

Alex: So to me what was weird was that they were taking pictures from so far away, like through the fence. To me it was like why wouldn't they come in, you know, to take the pictures?

Gunz: No but, I understand why they couldn't come in. Because by then the court was full, I don't know if you still remember, a lot of people used to come Fridays to just chill at the court and watch us play basketball. So one, they couldn't come in because there was no space. And two, there was a lot of black people and they're just white tourists, people passing through.

Alex: But that's the whole city, if they're in the city, like, they're surrounded by black people, there's nowhere they can go that they're not.

Gunz: Yeah that's true, that's true, I didn't think of that. But yeah, I don't know, maybe they just felt uncomfortable.

Alex: Maybe.

Gunz: Yeah, like let's not get close to that. Because you know what happens at the park, you're from the states so you should know the things that they advertise, or the things they show us. Like it starts at the basketball court, people get shot at the basketball court, and stuff like that at the parks. So maybe they thought it's going to be the same, ok let's just keep our distance. Let's just enjoy from here, don't- but it wasn't like that because we were happy, we are family, we don't roll like that.

Conversation between Alex and Gunz
6 September 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Amsterdam
(Mhlanga, 2020)

Gunz' decision to take pictures of those taking pictures of us was an attempt to question the intentions behind the action, to make people re-think their behaviour and views. Judith Butler touches on this concept of reframing a context in her text *Precarious Life*, *Grievable Life* before entering a more nuanced discussion around frames of war. She states, "the frame tends to function, even in minimalist form, as an editorial embellishment of the image, if not a commentary on the history of the frame itself… but as we know from Trinh Minh-ha, it is possible to "frame the frame" or, indeed, the "framer," which involves exposing the ruse that produces the effect of individual guilt… *to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn*… something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things" (Butler, 2010, pp. 7-8, my emphasis). In this story, the frame physically exists as the fence surrounding the court, but also a sense of "us and them" regarding city-dwellers and outsiders, poor and wealthy, black and white. The action of turning the camera back to the tourists was a deliberate action to "call the frame into question" and expose the nuances of the context and situation. The threshold changed its function in this moment, although still fully transparent, it now altered the way in which social groups on either side were perceived. Turning the camera back was a form of expressing agency and understanding the role of the threshold as not a cage nor a predetermined frame. The scene the tourists were thought to be capturing did not conform to their expectations and contained a world that caused a rupture in their understanding of the space.

Artist David Hammons uses the subject of basketball to call another sort of frame of race and culture into question in his work "Higher Goals." In the 1980s, Hammons created a series of exceptionally tall basketball hoops covered in found materials. He installed these at Cadman Plaza Park in Brooklyn in 1986 and 1987 while he was an artist in residence with the Public Art Fund. Hammons defines the work as an anti-basketball sculpture. He explains, "Basketball



"Higher Goals" artwork by David Hammons (Hecker, 2020)

has become a problem in the black community because the kids aren't getting an education. They're pawns in someone else's game. That's why it's called 'Higher Goals.' It means you should have higher goals in life than basketball" (McGill, 1986). While my work and commentary is not "anti-basketball," it does intend to change the narrative around what a basketball court space can be and what holds value at our court. The sport allows for a common interest to bring us together, but what my practice and research reflect are the ways that the sport and public space have allowed our community to strive for the "higher goals" that Hammons advocates for. Our networks at the court have brought about job and entrepreneurship opportunities, development of self-confidence, a safe haven and so much more.

My research and practice on this topic intends to continue to call the frame into question and to look at the court from the viewpoint of a member of the family - as a network of intertwining complex relationships that serve as the foundation for genuine connection and support. As a member of the court community, my orientation to the court is from within the space, past the threshold. This interpretation is meant first and foremost to speak to my court community - to reflect my appreciation for the support and family structure that I have gained through this group of individuals. Consequently, the work also speaks to other viewers: colleagues from institutions that create and maintain urban infrastructure, artists who interpret these worlds and other community members who are not part of the court family. To these individuals who normally view the court from outside of the threshold, the work aims to redirect the discussion around public space towards a more personal and nuanced view of who has access - not to the physical space itself, but to environments in which one can express oneself and develop one's identity and connections. I argue that if those with power over the development of such spaces[6] are aware of these thresholds, intangible webs and safety nets that are formed amongst people in public spaces, then these spaces can be supported to better allow groups and by default, individuals to develop and thrive.

6 The development I refer to includes public physical infrastructure, various forms of community accountability and adjustments to formal policing, cleaning and maintenance, etc.



CHAPTER ONE

FRESH OUT THE GATE AGAIN: DAY-TO-DAY REPETITION



Author's handwritten & collaged reference to "Full Clip" by Gang Starr
(Gang Starr, 1999)
Listen: Full Clip: Gang Starr

Fresh Out the Gate Again: Day-to-Day Repetition

A steady rhythm, interrupted yet consistent, like the rest of the city. The squeak of shoes on the court surface, trash talking and fear hidden beneath boastful voices. Smiles, high-fives, fist bumps. Day in and day out. Pushing and getting pushed back.

The past decade has laid the repetitive, consistent groundwork and locale for our court family - those of us who are consistently present in that space. On any given day, showing up at the court means familiarity: you are able to count on the game. It is structured, there are cheers and responses. Sound, rhythm and repetition at the court (the way we greet each other, the places we sit, the bouncing of the ball, our interactions) are what define the atmosphere and make it a home. The music prevalent in the space is hip hop and rap, predominantely American but also local, genres that feature repetitive beats to reinforce the rhythmic tone of the space. The court's cyclical flow and foundation serves as an underpinning to the other complexities, relationships and disruptions that may occur.

The music and repetitive sound present at the court is expounded by Tricia Rose's chapter "Soul Sonic Forces" in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* with 1) the nature of rhythm and repetition, particularly in African and Afrodiasporic worldviews, 2) the cut, or the spaces in between and 3) the return to foundational repetition after the cut. Rhythms and pattern are not only audibly present at the court, they also feature visually: the chain on the hoop, the holes in the bins, the chain link fence. Our relational dynamics can also be metaphorized as repetitive chains, loops, weaving and knotting.

The existence of community is reinforced by such visual and auditory elements within a space. Benedict Anderson notes this when describing how nations, as imagined communities, transitioned at the start of the 20th century, away from being religious and dynastic and towards being intellectualised. He articulates that "we are faced with a world in which the figuring of imagined reality was overwhelmingly visual and aural" (Anderson, 2016, pp. 22-23). The court's full cultural expression helps individuals to see it as a shared experience. The environment becomes a unique foundation on which bonds can be built.

These visual and aural examples of pattern and repetition at the court: the music present, the quotidian proceeding of events and the visual elements - each includes the notion of the spaces in between. Between the consistencies there are ruptures and breaks. While the consistent rhythm and flow of the court, chains and music are certain, just as certain are the gaps and holes, the suspension of time and the in-betweens: a chat with "the high table," a pause to the game because my dog ran away to chase a cat, a prolonged argument over whether a player stepped out of bounds or not. These moments of transparency and break are where I believe the root of the interconnectivity amongst individuals at the court has developed. This is where memories take hold and create a sense of community.







Loop, links, chains and hoops at the court, photographs by Alexandra Cunningham (Cunningham, 2021)

Alex: Do you have any specific memories of a moment when you were at the court and you felt very much at home?

Skylah: Every single day. Every single day. This is like, no matter where I am, I could be coming back from PTA around five, I will drop my bags and I will run here. I could be coming from school, I could be coming from a game, after a match from Randburg I run I come back here, or from practice. I make sure that I don't go home before passing by here first. Because this is where I get most of my peace.

Conversation between Alex and Skylah
12 January 2022, at the court in Johannesburg
(Peterson, 2022)

Alex: I wanted to ask you a little bit about music, because I mean clearly that's like your thing. But I don't remember, aside from Hoop Mania, any time where you actually like, brought music and played it at the court. Is that true? Or am I remembering incorrectly?

Pule: Yeah, no, this is totally true. Because you know I was- I was broke back then, like now I have one of these JBL boombox speakers, that when I go to the court here, I just take my thing, the boombox speaker and then I can connect bluetooth from my phone and play. But I did not have those resources back then, do you know what I mean? I didn't have resources back then. If there was ever a listening session, the guys would come back to my crib, and we would have a listening session. It happened a few times with Gunz and a few cats. I was just playing them some hip hop stuff because they were just hungry for some rap music. But at the court, not really, nobody had a bluetooth speaker, nobody, it just wasn't- I think, yeah, woah woah woah, I think there were a couple of times where- I think it was a Saturday, yeah, and I brought an extension cord, yeah, this did happen a few times, Alex. I took the, there's the one speaker, the Titan, I took it down to the court, with the extension cord and we connected it, because you could plug your phone with the cable. That did happen a few times.

Alex: Yeah, but not often: it wasn't like a, I feel like there wasn't, especially back then, I think now because you know, bluetooth speakers now have gotten cheap, and people actually have them, there's music at the court a lot more often.

Pule: Ok.

Alex: But back then it wasn't. But I think that there was still like, it was like there was music even though there wasn't, do you know what I mean? And I don't know why, I don't know. I don't know if you have any insight into that?

Pule: Yeah, I see, you remember there being music but you don't remember a speaker there, yeah this is true. I think maybe cats were playing it on their phone? But there was just, that's what it is, basketball is music, you know you will rap or sing to each other, do you know what I mean? It's- there's music in the movement, you know what I mean, um I don't know but I know what you mean.

Conversation between Alex and Pule
30 August 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Munich
(Mathebula, 2020)

Artist Ruth Asawa creates hanging sculptures made of a looping wire method that she first observed being used by basket weavers in Mexico. She explains, “I was interested in the economy of a line, making something in space, enclosing it without blocking it out. It’s still transparent. I realized that if I was going to make these forms, which interlock and interweave, it can only be done with a line because a line can go anywhere” (ed. Cornell, 2006). Asawa uses the material to express space and relationship, understanding that movement and line can direct the way that the piece is read and interacted with. Basketball is movement, the game is a sort of line that allows for interlocking and weaving to form around it. Thessaly LaForce describes Asawa’s work in a TMagazine article, “I have stood in a gallery hung with Asawa’s wire sculptures, where the movement of my own body has caused them to sway, the shadows of the woven wire dancing against the floor. For a moment, I was quietly transported elsewhere — to the deep sea, to a forest or maybe to someplace altogether unearthly” (La Force, 2020). Similarly, the court transports you to another place, the sounds and structures help to create that, but ultimately it is the way we move and relate with one another that creates another sort of world.

In discussing memory and collective experience in *Materials, Memories and Metaphors*, Solveigh Goett notes, “The knowledge of memory is not a collection of empirical facts, but arises in the weaving together of felt and imagined experience” (2015, p. 125). Daily routine at the court: shooting around evolving into a game of twenty-one, then choosing teams to play three-on-three in which games are played to seven points, then the winning team takes on the next team outside until there are no more teams. Then things dissolve into one-on-one or shooting around until it is decided to leave and lock up.[7] These rhythms create a woven shared felt and imagined experience, the foundation for a deeply intertwined community.

Responses to the Inevitability of Repetition

Repetition in day-to-day life, imagery and music is not a unique phenomenon. Yet the ways in which different cultures and communities react to its existence is distinct. Referring to repetition in music, Rose in *Black Noise* articulates, “Unlike the complexity of Western classical music, which is primarily represented in its melodic and harmonic structures, the complexity of rap music, like many Afrodiasporic musics, is in the rhythmic and percussive density and organization” (1994, p. 65). On a related note in *Music, Society, Education*, Christopher Small suggests that “the repetitions of African music have a function in time which is the reverse of (Western classical) music - to dissolve the past and the future into one eternal present, in which the passing of time is no longer noticed” (1977, pp. 54-55). The comfort and repetition I always felt in spaces meant for sport parallels the rhythm of African and Afrodiasporic music. The court ecosystem has become an “eternal present.” As a member of this court community, now for over a decade, when reminded of the year we started and the year we are in now, I am continually in awe of just how much time has passed.

7 Locking up changes depending on our relationship with the City Improvement District (CID) management - at times we are kicked out at a predetermined locking time.



Ruth Asawa building one of her sculptures (LaForce, 2020)

In my crochet work, each stitch creates a monotonous looping of material that seems to be getting nowhere. As I continue though, the shape, pattern and structure develops and becomes something substantial. This method can be used to make a blanket or a bag, a functional material of use to someone, just as the repetition in the court space can create a community that could support an individual as they navigate their life in Joburg. Independently of function, these movements of repetition can create something that is simply beautiful to observe or to experience - an artwork born out of monotony and consistency, resulting in something much more complex when it has reached its full form. I have found that the interweaving of the thread or material I use parallels the ways that individuals at the court interrelate with one another.

Hammons' method of working on "Higher Goals" also reflects this concept of time. A 1986 New York Times article about this work states, "Even Mr. Hammons's working method - time-consuming handwork instead of modern fabrication technique - is based on a tribal African notion of time instead of contemporary 'fast' time, Mr. Hammons said" (McGill, 1986). Using bottle caps and other metal items, Hammons created patterns and repetitive motifs across the tall basketball poles.

Crochet also involves the steady notion of time in its handcrafted nature. I hand crocheted and wove together each piece in the body of work about the court. I experimented and unravelled and re-stitched repetitively until each element expressed the concepts I intended to convey. In the piece "Unravel," I was able to quickly hand crochet a looping pattern of various yarns that continued until each bunch of yarn finished. Having developed a technique of working with the yarn over time, creating a piece that reflected this technique and repetition ultimately came together quickly, but entirely by hand. This experience was reminiscent of the muscle memory developed by practising a sport so much that when it comes to a critical moment in competition, the ability to execute comes swiftly and naturally. "Unravel" starts from a basketball hoop mounted on the wall and cascades and drapes throughout the space. The viewer is invited to pull on the loose end of the yarn, demonstrating how the repetition and time involved can be so quickly and easily undone. Creating, destroying, creating again is all part of the process not only of these artworks, but of the court community itself.

Over time, individuals present at the court change, yet the nature of the interactions remains, an amorphous community that philosophist and physicist Karen Barad might identify as an example of "intra-action." She describes intra-action as the idea that "'Individuals' only exist within phenomena (particular materialized/materializing relation) in their ongoing iteratively intra-active reconfiguring" (Barad, 2012, p. 77). Barad studied amoeba colonies as part of her research to develop this concept that calls into question the binary between group and individual. Perhaps the nature of the sport and the routine of the court space has allowed for such a phenomena amongst our court community, one in which our interconnectivity is what allows each of us to "exist" in a relational sense. Individuals may come and go in this space, as many have over the past decade, yet the nature of the communal remains. One of the

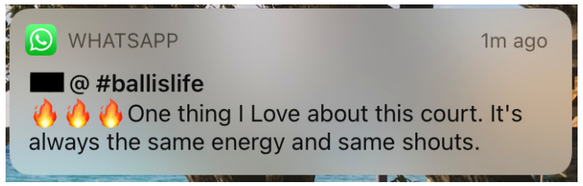


David Hammons with his artwork "Higher Goals" in progress (Hecker, 2020)



‘Unravel,’ artwork by Alexandra Cunningham, photograph by Sizakele Angel Khumalo (Cunningham, 2022d)

original court community members came to the court in 2021 after years away and joined the (relatively new) WhatsApp group. Despite the many new names and faces, he found that same sense of home.



Whatsapp group text (2021, pers. comm., 9 April)

The Cut

In my first few months exploring the concept for this research and practice, I wrote a comment in my notes: “How do you make any claim when the ground of your context is the certainty of uncertainty?” Through my research and practice, I am finding that the answer is in the quotidian, the repetition, the cyclical nature of the court and its culture. That foundational netting allows for a type of peace and stability amidst a consistently unstable reality. In his observations on the Johannesburg inner city, urbanist and sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone explains that “a certain stability to public spaces and streets is fostered by the sense that anything could happen to anyone” (2008, p. 80). The familiarity of this feeling of inevitable spontaneity in our surrounding environment echoes the knowledge that for something to be repeated, a break must occur before the repeat, a break in which anything can happen.

> The moments in between the game, sitting outside: The question - ‘do you have airtime?’ The ‘who’s got next?’ The debates and wannabe bribes, the music and the drinks. The wanting to play when you’re injured. The seeing of an old friend after five years. The iTunes vs Spotify vs USB debate. The disappointed shouts when someone makes a good move but misses.
>
> Note written on my phone while at the court 2021

These are the spaces in between - in musical terms, the beat breaks - that take place outside of the court. This is where the magic happens and where the strength of the chains and connections that have been built over a decade are put to the test. Will they help us catch each other when we fall? Will they fail or take a pause? The chains can rust - these beat breaks can be filled with disappearances, betrayals and major shifts. Moving through these spaces in between can hype you up or tear you down.

Musically, these spaces are known as the ‘cut,’ further explained by James Snead in *On Repetition in Black Culture*: “If there is a goal…. It is always deferred; it continually ‘cuts’ back to the start, in the musical meaning of a ‘cut’ as an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break… Black culture, in the ‘cut,’ ‘builds’ accidents into its coverage, almost as if to control their unpredictability” (1981, p. 150). At the court, this day-to-day way in which the people in the space connect to each other is what creates that consistent rhythm: the game, the conversations, the ball bouncing.

The “cut” comes at the start of a new game, the unintended foul, the way that the beer bottles we enjoy on weekends can one day be broken and used as weapons.

Alex: I wanted to ask you specifically about the incident with Dan[8] and the broken bottle, and all of that.

Tupy: And the broken bottle, yeah.

Alex: If you’re comfortable talking about that.

Tupy: Yes.

Alex: Ok can you tell the story? What happened?

Tupy: The story, yes. What happened was Dan was there, I don’t know what was wrong with him that day, he came in here and I don’t know why, but as he was playing he was busy bullying the other kids. And I told him, Dan you can’t be doing that. If you don’t want to play today, just sit down and just let other kids play, or if you want to play just continue playing, just do not be aggressive to other kids, because they came here to play but wena, what you are doing here is just totally wrong, it’s just the opposite of what I know you to do. So at some point he clapped somebody else, and I got in between, trying to separate them. As I was separating them, the other person, I don’t recall who that kid was, decided to punch him straight on the face, so that’s when things went haywire, he was totally out of control. Because now, I was trying to separate them, as I was trying to control them, this other one punched him in the face, so he was very angry. I tried pulling him back, he was angry that that kid punched him and now he wants to get his. But for me that didn’t sit well, because look, they normally play here, so if we allow them to, if I allow them to fight, it’s going to be out of control, you don’t know what’s going to happen, there might be a weapon or something. So I tried to separate, so as I separated them, we were over there. As we were talking and we were still trying to play, he decided to slap me, and he was up there in the top step. After slapping me, I caught his hand and I smacked him. Well, I wasn't supposed to have acted that way, but he didn’t have any right to clap me. To begin with, I am older than him, that’s the first thing. Two, I would never - he was one of the kids that I was mentoring, I knew his situation, his family situation wasn’t good, he was staying at a place of safety in Hillbrow. Three, I was the one who got him the scholarship to be at university, I tried linking him up with the scholarship.

Alex: Oh wow I didn’t know that.

Tupy: Yeah. As he was doing that I didn’t want him to be in trouble, because if he does that, part of his scholarship conditions was that he shouldn’t be involved in a fight, should he be involved in that then they would pull the plug on the scholarship. So after that, he went out to go get a bottle. Me being the person that I am, I didn’t know whether he was getting the bottle for me or for the young boy. So, and I wasn’t going to let that boy get stabbed in the park... so as he came in I decided no he’s not going to do that, because if he goes to that boy, chances are he will kill him, he’s going to do something very bad, then I stood in between, I saw him holding the bottle, I couldn’t let him stab him, as I did that, I think we were over there somewhere. There was a stick that I picked, just so he doesn’t stab me or anything. As we were outside and I was pushing him further away from the kid, he started stabbing me for no apparent reason, he started stabbing me, stabbing me, first thing it was the face... As we went outside, I think we were outside the gate by then and everybody now wanted to beat him up because what he did was uncalled for. So we were standing just there, Gunz and them wanted to beat him up, and they decided to, and he called, I don’t know who called the cops or anything like that. At a later stage we were sitting over there and the cops were asking what happened and he started to spin the story around to me and I started the fight you know and everybody else told him straight to his face, no you’re lying, you are the one who started to fight with this one and to fight with this one and you decided to be aggressive to everybody in the park. The cops wanted either me or him to open a case, I didn’t want to open a case though. He decided to open a case.

Alex: Really?

Tupy: Yes, because I smacked him after, I no, over here. After that, so he started to, he wanted to open, so he opened that case. So the cops just told me right away, that wena, you need to open a counter case, because now if he goes there and you are arrested for assault it will be something else now. You open a counter assault, counter this case it will be fine. But mine carried a lot of weight because he stabbed me and it was uncalled for. But again, when we got to court, I had some time to think about it, when we got to court, he came to me, he wanted to apologise. I told him, you know what, for me, I don’t want to deal with this thing, and I don’t want to be part of the reason why you lose your future. That’s the first thing, you will lose your scholarship. If you do that I don’t know what will happen to you after, because I know your situation at home, I knew his father was not going to take him to school, that I knew. So I decided, you know what, I’m cancelling the case. I decided to just cancel it. Because what I looked into was way beyond him being punished for what he did. It was about after punishing him, what then? Is it a corrective measure or I just want him- is it a punitive or corrective measure? For me, I thought, this is punitive, so I decided let’s go the corrective route. If he doesn’t change then at least he was given a chance. That’s just how I saw it, if he doesn't change, then well, it would be up to him, it wouldn’t be for my doing and saying that I’m taking this away from him because he did one, two, three. Yes he did that, he’s a young person at some point. And I understand he was still in, he had a lot of issues to deal with to be honest, but again that didn’t give him any right to be aggressive to anyone, to stab anyone or to do any of the things that he did. That’s just how I saw it. But again does he deserve a second chance? Everybody does. That’s just how I saw it.

Alex: Interesting, there’s so much in that story that I didn’t know.

Tupy: Yeah, there’s so much, and ever since then- I once met him, I met him once and he still wanted to go back there to apologise and I told him, you know what wena, when you see me don’t be scared to come to me and talk to me, for me what happened, you were still young that’s one thing. Two, I understood where you- I understood the fact that he was going through a lot, as a young person he was still trying to find himself. A lot was happening in his life, not necessarily saying that he had a right to do what he did, a lot was happening in his life but he was a young person still trying to find his feet, it might have been a lot to deal with for him, and no wonder he acted the way he did.

Conversation between Alex and Tupy
13 January 2022, at the court in Johannesburg
(Masengana, 2022)

This fragment in time illustrates the ruptures that do occur within the rhythmic nature of the court, the breaks that are expected and integral to the routine and sense of stability, but are also jarring and that change the course of the space moving forward.

Such breaks and gaps are present in crochet, referred to as “space” in which a stitch can be looped into or around or skipped altogether. Different stitches and patterns can create larger or smaller gaps in between. When developing the pieces for this body of work, I at times intentionally made larger gaps or smaller gaps to evoke transparency or tight-knittedness. At times I attempted to visually mimic the spaces in between that are present in the court environment: the chain link or the net. Other times I explored concepts of pattern or style, tencillity or slackness. The type of repetition, stitch and pattern I chose to make for each element allowed these concepts to emerge from the material.

8 Dan is not the real name of this individual





Above and Right: ‘The Cut,’ artwork by Alexandra Cunningham, photographs by Sizakele Angel Khumalo (Cunningham, 2022c)

Hammons also works with the idea of space and gaps in “Higher Goals.” “’The idea comes from this,’ said the sculptor David Hammons, nudging a tuft of tall grass with his foot. ‘I wanted the work to be like wisps of grass coming out of the ground. I like a lot of air between things, like musical notes or scales’” (McGill, 1986). The air and space between is the cut, creating music and movement, allowing our growth and interconnectivity.

The cut is also a phrase used in Barad’s description of intra-action. She uses the term “cuts” to refer to the creation of dichotomies and that the nature of intra-action erases this binary. She explains that “differences are made, not found, and that dichotomies derive from particular cuts,” but that in her concept of intra-action, matter is entangling and constantly becoming, enacting what she calls an agential cut, which “cross-cuts not only the notion of ‘itself’ but even the notion of the cut itself” (Barad, 2012, pp. 79-80). Perhaps the cut is not so much about illustrating the gaps, differences and binaries, but rather a space in which the collective dynamics play out and then realign. A Tribe Called Quest’s 1990 track “Youthful Expression” includes an outro that states: “With a rhythmic instinction to be able to travel beyond existing forces of life. Basically, that’s tribal and if you wanna get the rhythm, then you have to join a tribe” (1990). The collective or the tribe is what roots one in a rhythm that allows for shifts and changes and second chances.

Return to Rhythm

Seven years after the broken bottle incident, Dan is occasionally back at the court. Most people have no idea of the history, but a few of us do. Each of us who remembers is uneasy to different degrees, but there is an unspoken consciousness that the rhythm of the court allows for his return. In speaking to Tupy, I mentioned that Dan has been back and Tupy was ok with this. The intra-action possibly takes over and allows for another chance. Snead explains this as a key element in black culture: “In black culture, the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is there for you to pick up when you come back to get it” (1981, p. 150). The foundational repetition is what allows for a return after the cut. At the court, this is what creates a sense of equanimity and home.

> Alex: But would you say that like, my interpretation of this, that it’s a repetition and it’ll keep being a repetition, we will still welcome people?
>
> Tupy: I agree with you, I most definitely agree with you. It will remain the same, like get to a pause, like in a song, the way you put it, come to a pause, when you are done you continue. Like what happened you left, I left, came back, still continued. That’s the whole thing. Like, coming to think of it, um, there’s not many programmes, or many, how do I put it, there’s not many courts in South Africa that have done what this park here has done… going different paths, some have made it big, even if it’s not big, they have made it somehow, because of this park. If it was not for this park, some people would not be where they are today. There’s a whole lot of those.
>
> Conversation between Alex and Tupy
> 13 January 2022, at the court in Johannesburg
> (Masengana, 2022)

The cut and the return to repetition may seem like insignificant components of a hip hop track or of a community or culture, but as Rose emphasises, “These features are not merely stylistic effects, they are aural manifestations of philosophical approaches to social environments” (1994, p. 67). The inherent nature of being allowed to return, allowed to try again, to make mistakes in the beat breaks and attempt crazy things is what enables continual growth and movement - like the intra-actions of an amoeba colony. This is inherent to sport as well, learning a new play or basketball move requires patience and practice and continual failure until it clicks and works out. Our day-to-day at the court includes this: a continual striving to improve and win, a continual effort to build a sense of community.

Returning to the visuals and patterns at the court, the intertwining of the fence and the chain of the hoop netting literally surround and centre the space. Rose also comments on such intertwining and looping: “Rap music relied on the loop, on the circularity of rhythm and on the “cut” or the “break beat” that systematically ruptures equilibrium. Yet, in rap, the “break beat” itself is looped - repositioned as repetition, as equilibrium inside the rupture” (1994, p. 70). In crochet, I can take that same thread that creates the structure to also create the break and then to revisit the structure again. In crochet, in hip hop music, in the court’s timeline: inconsistency is built into the structure.

Claire Pajaczkowska’s text *Making Known: The Textiles Toolbox - Psychoanalysis of Nine Types of Textile Thinking* reflects on various practices in textile production. In her description of stitching, she notes, “It is surprising how the process of reflexive looping, or doubling back, which is to integrate to the stitch process, becomes a metaphorical, as well as literal, mechanism of reflexivity. When a progressive movement forward includes a backwards movement within it, there is a space and time of reflective thought” (Pajaczkowska, 2015, p. 86). The court is a space in which the collective is continuously reaching back and reaching forward, both to real memories and perceived ones about basketball culture and such communal spaces. The individuals may shift and change over time, but we form a collective thread, continually looping forwards and backwards.

This collective thread can be used to describe how the past decade at this court has included ebbs and flows in the way the space is used. These have directly connected to the people and nature of their social dynamics with one another. While the physical infrastructure bears influence on this, I argue that the physical is a byproduct of the social. The break-down in interpersonal allows for gaps in maintenance and repair of the physical, creating a cycle in which the key elements are the people, and the physical state is just a sign or representation of how those relationships play out. At the court, there was a period of deterioration from 2016-2018 where the court physically fell apart, but also core members of the community faded away.



Court community members before the renovations, photograph by A Cunningham (Cunningham, 2019)

Mike: We saw the court, what did we do about it?

Alex: You went somewhere else.

Mawere: We would have written a petition.

Mike: You understand, so it's also a matter of what you saw and what you think about it. And this is where you came in, because you actually saw the court and you were like, no, this is, we gotta do something about it, and you actually did something. Which is something that is amazing. Because I mean, I never, in 2016, was it 2016? I actually never thought this court was going to come back.

Mawere: Me too, I was like ah it's done.

Alex: Really?

Mike and Mawere: Yeah, this court is done.

Alex: And you were ok with it?

Mawere: No we were not ok.

Mike: Who is going to come and fix this thing, and who is going to do something about it, the board?

Mawere: And you were gone. Alex was gone.

Alex: I was gone, yeah.

Mawere: And there's no one else, we got no hope in anyone else.

Alex: And then Gunz was gone, and Denzel was gone.

Mawere: Gunz was gone, Denzel was gone. So we were like eish, this court is, maybe this is the death of it. I thought they were going to remove the court and put something else.

Alex: Really?

Mawere: Yeah that's what I thought, like maybe they were going to put benches or something there because this was gone.

Alex: That would have been horrible.

Conversation amongst Alex, Mike, Mawere and Chrispen
19 September 2020, at Alex's flat in Johannesburg
(Chawa, Chawa & Mawere, 2020)

This situation echos AbdouMaliq Simone's idea of "people as infrastructure" which he explains as "This process of conjunction, which is capable of generating social compositions across a range of singular capacities and needs (both enacted and virtual) and which attempts to derive maximal outcomes from a minimal set of elements, is what I call people as infrastructure" (2008, p. 71). As the court deteriorated, Gunz moved to Europe, I moved to the U.S. for nine out of twelve months of the year, Denzel went to play professional basketball in Seychelles and others began going to other courts. By 2019 I had been back for a year and was able to get buy-in from the JDA to resurface the court and I oversaw the project.

This was a rebirth in the space not only of the physical, but of the relational. People who had not seen each other in years came back for a community meeting, people spent time at the court again before the renovation began. We were not even playing, the court was in too poor of a state for competitive play, but it was the reignition of the rhythm that once was - our collaborative building of a space, a community that it once was.

The interest in keeping the court going, ensuring that it is usable and playable exists amongst each of us. Unfortunately, things can fall apart to a point of being unable to be repaired by those consistently in the space. We use the resources that are readily available to us to repair what we can, but there are limits, moments when we need public institutions to step in and support. While the relational threads that link us together are ultimately what make us thrive and bring value to public space, that space's functionality is necessary as the foundation that allows our separate world to develop.

"So, it was a Friday afternoon in 2011. We had knocked off work at 1pm and as was tradition, we headed to the basketball court to shoot some hoops. It was quite a walk from Braamfontein to the CBD. None of us owned a car and this was pre-Uber era, so we had to step.

We got to the court only to find the court wet as it had previously rained before noon. The surface was essentially unplayable. We could either go home or wait a couple of hours for the court to dry up. Nevertheless, being hungry to play as we were then, we had to make a plan. We grabbed a couple of brooms from the nearby bathrooms and swept the water off the court. It was hard work to sweep water with a broom and not a rubber broom.

Ultimately, we swept enough water to play without risk of slipping. Took us about an hour but it was worth it because ball is life!"

narrative written and photograph provided by Gabriel via WhatsApp message
(G Tiki 2021, pers. comm., 26 March)

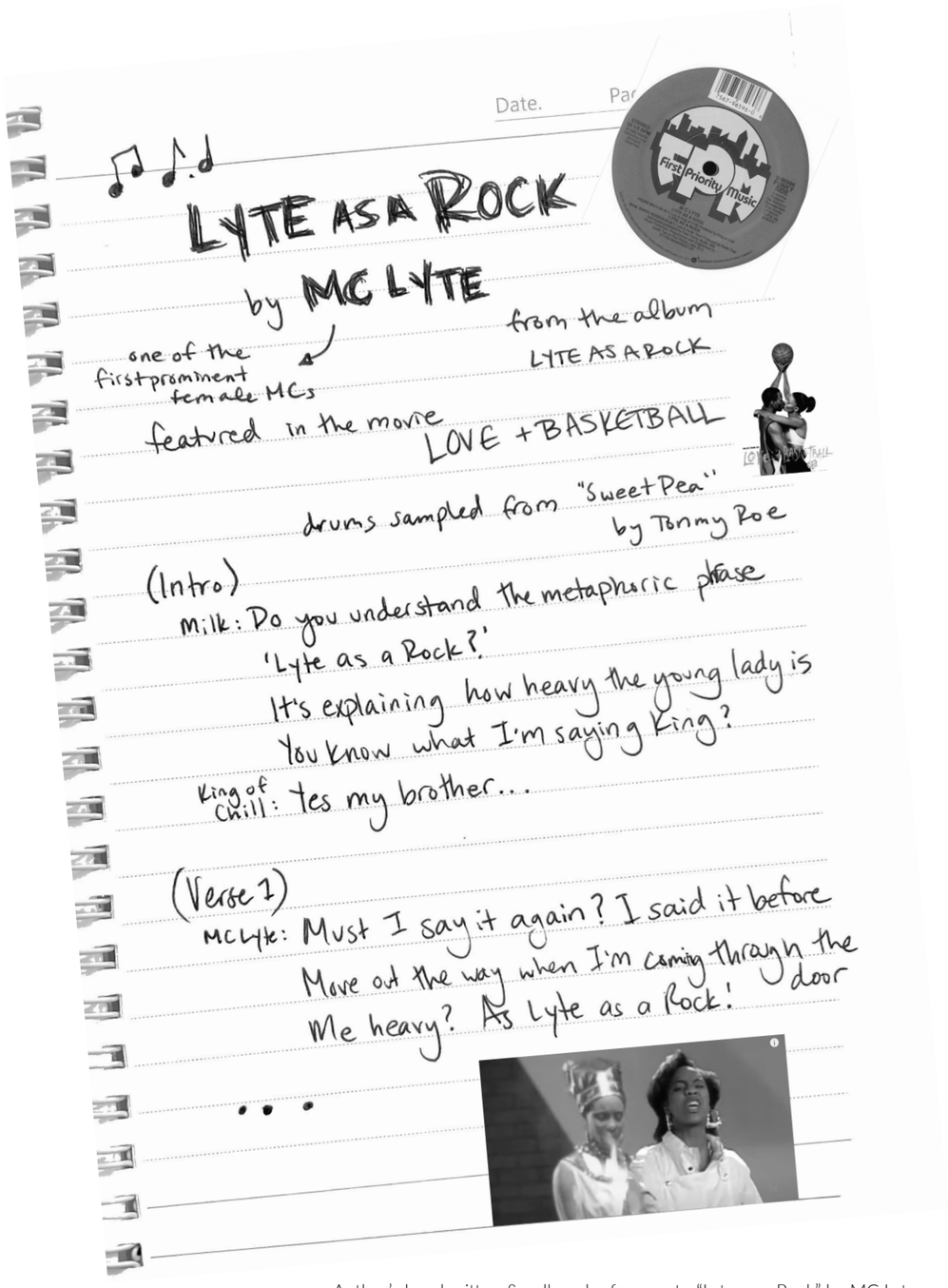


Court community members sweeping away puddles, photograph by G Tiki, 2011

CHAPTER TWO

IT'S EXPLAINING HOW HEAVY THE YOUNG LADY IS: FEMININITY AT THE COURT





Author's handwritten & collaged reference to "Lyte as a Rock" by MC Lyte (MC Lyte, 1988)
Listen: Lyte as a Rock: MC Lyte

It's Explaining How Heavy the Young Lady Is: Femininity at the Court

Sweeping the court after rain still takes place to this day. Skylah texted and sent a photo in the court's WhatsApp group last year:



"I'm already sweeping for you guys ...u see..."
(S Peterson 2021, pers. comm., 29 January)

Alex: Can you tell me any more about sweeping the court or why you do it or if you remember this day?

Skylah: Nobody wanted to sweep the court, you know? And then I was like, you know what, if I don't sweep we are not going to play, and at that point I wanted to play, I came to play and people don't want to sweep. I was like, you know what, I went to the security guard, I'm like 'do you have a broom?' They were like 'Yeah, we have a broom.' I'm like 'Give me the broom I want to go sweep.' Then I had to come here and sweep and stuff so that we don't slip and fall you know and then have injuries and stuff. So I was like you know what, I will do it, it's fine, ok? Don't panic, I'm the girl here, you know, so let me do it. So yeah, it's crazy.

Conversation between Alex and Skylah
12 January 2022, at the court in Johannesburg
(Peterson, 2022)

From when I arrived at the court in 2011, I was the only consistent feminine presence. Others passed through the space or were around on occasion, often for a year or a few months, but no one who played nearly every day like I did, nor who took on the consistent mother/sister role like I did. In 2017, while I was spending the majority of the year in the U.S., Skylah started to spend time at the court. She did not play, but she wanted to learn. To this day she is there just as much as I am. In fact, over the past year or so she is there more than me. A generational shift is occurring - she is now the same age I was when I first came to the court over a decade ago. As the consistent women in the space, we are often expected to be the ones to take responsibility for cleaning (as with the sweeping) and maintenance (as I have done over the years).

In the middle of our conversation at the court a security guard interrupts to ask Alex about whether the local traders can use the court for a meeting later in the day.

Alex: So then there's also that, where like I am expected to be the one that-

Skylah: When you first fixed the court, right, I was like, Jeff, is she the owner of the court? And then Jeff was like yeah! So like, I'll be like, so this means we must report to her, right? He's like yeah! I'm like, just like this guy, right, coming to ask you for this, everybody thinks it's Alex, it's Alex, she has the keys to the park, it's her responsibility for like, everything, you know. You're the face of the court.

Alex: And I'm not. But at the same- so when I first started doing more, there were a few of us that were doing more, so you didn't know.

Security guard interrupts again to ask Alex when she is going to fix the fence and how he thinks he shouldn't give non-basketball players permission to the court because basketball players play the whole day and keep the place safe.

Alex: See it's like, oh you must give us permission. I don't give, I don't have any rights to anything here.

Skylah: Yeah, I mean like everybody, they will be like, ah the chain is broken, call Alex! Um, the tap? Alex! You know, yeah.

Alex: And I try.

Skylah: Yeah, yeah you do.

Conversation between Alex and Skylah
12 January 2022, at the court in Johannesburg
(Peterson, 2022)

Within the first year at this court in Johannesburg, I fell into a motherly role, one that I have taken on even from a young age amongst not only male-dominated sport spaces but also amongst my female friends or in babysitting and as a preschool teacher and professional nanny when I was an undergraduate student. I am expected to be "the responsible one" and I like taking care of others. I often feel most comfortable when I am able to do so. The way that Audre Lorde comments on the strength involved in a mother role in *Sister Outsider* resonates with how I feel in my role at the court. "Mothering means the laying to rest of what is weak, timid and damaged - without despisal - the protection and support of what is useful for survival and change, and our joint explorations of that difference" (1984, p. 170). This focus on strength and the hope to move forward is what I attempted to bring to the court, to my friendships and networks there - without realising that this could be considered a facet of "mothering."

Gunz: So yeah people get comfortable coming to the court because they feel relieved, they have something to do.

Alex: So a lot of people credit that to you. Do you think you made an effort to make the court that way or do you think it just naturally was that way?

Gunz: Ah, I might have influenced it. Because I grew up with the same thing to me - I wanted to play basketball, like where I started to play basketball, we weren't allowed to play with a basketball, we have to play with a tennis ball, so I know the kind of feeling where people say don't do it, where you're not allowed to play, so I didn't want to instil the same thing to other people because it used to bother me back in the days. So people come to play, they say ahhh they want to play, ah we don't know your name, so we give you a chance, you can play. That's how everyone started anyway. So yeah, maybe I just made people see that yeah let's give each other a chance. They might not know what to do, but that's why they're at the court, to practice. Yeah I'll take it, the credit (laughing). Sorry I'm just- sometimes we need to just take the credit.

Alex: It's true, especially after so much time.

Gunz: But you influenced that too. Because I might have been since day one, but you came up with the structure. With me it's just something I lean into, but you put a structure, a foundation to everything that happened at that court. To us we were just playing basketball, but then you built a structure. We realised we are family, so yeah, you actually did a huge part also. Even to me. Yeah I was the one there first, but when you came through, everything changed. We started seeing things in different ways. So yeah, I give you the credit too. A lot of people might not know that because maybe they were not close to you, they were just coming to talk to me as if, since they're giving me credit, but it comes from you. Because you mapped out the whole situation.

Alex: Thank you (laughing).

Conversation between Alex and Gunz
6 September 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Amsterdam
(Mhlanga, 2020)

It is important to acknowledge Lorde's positionality as a black, queer woman in contrast to my own positionality and experiences within my community. Lorde's definition of mothering - the strength and hope involved, feels profoundly relevant to how some of us at the court stepped up and became integral parts of the community. With great respect for Lorde's original intentions in this definition, this interpretation of mothering was not only expressed by myself, but also by men in the space. The complications of roles and identities within our community becomes evident in this observation. At the court, these roles of responsibility are not delineated by traditional points of difference such as gender. Perhaps the experience of inspiring hope and hiding our weak parts to put on a brave face of possibility are not only feminine, motherly characteristics, but rather can manifest across multitudes of identities.

Skylah: I feel like it's about the person, right, about the guy. There are some guys that sweep here. There are guys who do what we females do as well. So, it depends on the person, it depends on that particular guy. So yeah.

Alex: That's true. When you do have to take on the extra responsibilities, does that make you feel any particular way? Or are you just like ah whatever...

Skylah: No, I actually love being responsible for things, you know like carrying out duties and stuff like that. Yeah, I love doing that, I don't even have a problem with that, it's for the court. It's for the court!

Alex: The common good, it's for the community.

Conversation between Alex and Skylah
12 January 2022, at the court in Johannesburg
(Peterson, 2022)

The idea that these roles are taken on based on individual inclinations rather than gender, age or race came up consistently in our conversations. This illustrates just how closely we, as a court community, see each other as individuals. Early on at the court in 2011 and 2012, if I were to have brought up these ideas, gender roles, age and race would likely have been prominently cited as the reasons for certain behaviours. As we have all grown closer and into a family, who we are as individuals is instead highlighted. This is not to say that these personal characteristics have not been developed through societal constructs and life experiences based on race, age and gender, rather it is to point out the ways in which each community member is seen as a whole being with their own nuances and inclinations.

Alex: But a lot of people have said that I - of course, like, I have like a motherly kind of presence at the court and that has made people closer? Like especially all you guys with your 'guy relationships' where you're like, you're friends but you're not super tight, and I somehow made it more like a family, or like, I don't know, hanging out and having food.

Mawere: Exactly, I was-

Alex: Is that true or is that an exaggeration? I feel like it's an exaggeration.

Mawere: No, I was about to say like, you are like the mother figure, because you are the only woman at the court.

Chrispen: All of these years it's been you.

Mawere: It's been you. You are the only woman who is there. So you are like the mother figure to everybody. So everyone respects you like a mom. Denzel started calling you mom.

Chrispen: Denzel calls you mom!?

Alex: Yeah, I call him son or kid. But he also, like Denzel and I have a- he stayed here for a while. Like he is basically my son, yeah, Gunz and I are basically his parents.

Mawere: Yeah he stayed here for a while, I remember.

Alex: But does that have to do with just me happening to be a woman who plays or does that have to do with like, me and Gunz being so close? Because I feel like he and I became the parent figures of the court.

Mike: To me I think it's kind of personality.

Alex: Interesting.

Mike: Because, I mean, if you were a different person, even though you were with Gunz and all that. I think if you were a different person, then, it's all about personality, because you actually care more about basketball. Like you are one person that I have seen who cares more about basketball.

Mawere: You were actually stressed when the court wasn't right.

Alex: I was so stressed.

Mawere: You were stressed, like you put everything in to make sure the court was right. And you would communicate with everyone, like here is the progress with the court. Guys, next week we are going to have the court done, next week we are going to have this done, next week-

Mike: You understand?

Mawere: So you're kind of like, yeah Mike is right, it's kind of like a personality. Maybe if it was someone else maybe who plays there they would be like ah-

Mike: Yeah you know, I mean there are so many people who came, but they are like ah it's fine. Ah the court, basketball...

Mawere: But you made sure the court, because you knew, to a lot of people, this is a home to a lot of people.

Alex: And to me.

Mawere: Yeah and to you, so you knew like this is home.

Mike: And look at it, but look at how amazing it is now, everything is back together, I mean, to be honest let's thank you for that, because I mean it wouldn't have happened-

Mawere: If it wasn't for you, if you were not there, it wouldn't have happened.

Alex: Isn't that a problem though, like shouldn't it be self-sustaining, does it really need me? Because I also feel a lot of guilt around, I have a lot of access because I'm white, because I'm American.

Mawere: That's true.

Alex: And that's messed up, whether I'm there or not it should be everyone, you guys should all have the same access that I do, but like-

Mawere: Because now, when you talk like say to City Parks about the court, and it's someone who is black and it's not a woman-

Mike: But to me man, if you have the ability to-

Chrispen: You make it happen-

Mawere: It is-

Chrispen: It's just your dedication, it's just-

Alex: And it's connections.

Mike: Yeah, connections.

Alex: I do think, like, because I have connections with the City, and anyone, even if they were not white or a woman, you could still have those connections, but maybe it's easier for me?

Mike: But no, also it's a point, it's all about the, what you think about the whole situation. Because I mean we also saw the court, what did we do about it? You understand?

Alex: That's true, yeah.

Conversation amongst Alex, Mike, Mawere and Chrispen
19 September 2020, at Alex's flat in Johannesburg
(Chawa, Chawa & Mawere, 2020)

At the court there is no denying my femininity, my whiteness, my Americanisms. I fight to prove that I am as tough and that I belong, but I no longer hide or ignore the other parts of me. My inclination towards being a motherly figure, my desire for family, community and warmth is obvious. Somehow this has woven itself into my world at the court. My perceived "toughness" has only grown stronger as I express these parts of myself. Lorde speaks about her own experience expressing who she is within a broader community, stating that "My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am" (1984, p. 113). These words opened my eyes to my own multi-faceted, yet vastly different experience and identity. Around 2013, I was able to find and integrate the parts that make up myself most strongly, especially as I developed a smaller nuclear family consisting of Gunz, Denzel and myself. We were each drawn to each other out of both a desire for support structures and actual necessity.

Alex: So speaking of family, I want to talk about our family - you, me and Denzel. Why do you think we all connected in the way that we did? Like what made that happen?

Gunz: I think we- it's love actually. So I put it that way, we connected each other, the three of us. Yeah I think we just wanted support and we supported each other. From the day that we met each other. To sum it up I think it was all about love.

...

Alex: Your experience at the court, your experience with us as a family, did it change you? Did it make you different?

Gunz: Yeah, it made me who I am right now. I got to consider people's feelings, I don't really put myself first but, yeah I had to put people's feelings first and get to know what they, yeah it changed me actually, plus I'm Denzel's father - he made me a father and you a mom, And that was special, Yeah it changed me, made me view things in a different way.

Conversation between Alex and Gunz
6 September 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Amsterdam
(Mhlanga, 2020)



Denzel, Alex and Gunz at the lobby of Alex's home in Johannesburg, 2013 (Family, 2013)

This family gave me a springboard from which to express myself with more confidence and to acknowledge the realities within myself and facing my community. As I began to understand my role within the court, I also took on more responsibilities, reaching out and using elements of my identity that give me access and privilege: my whiteness and my professional role in the field of urban development. We established a monthly tournament called Hoop Mania and built hype and prestige around the court. A few others along with myself spearheaded more integral relationships with the local improvement district and the security in the park, securing more agency and access regarding the space that we had begun to claim as our own. These relationships and networks wove into strong support systems. Over time, these would eventually unravel, then re-knit years later in different forms.

Yet all of this took a toll, an intense emotional labour described by Ahmed and Fortier in *Re-imagining Communities*, "On a smaller scale, for those seeking to create communities as sites of comfort or refuge, the establishment and maintenance of 'communities' - real or virtual - require quiet but demanding physical and emotional labour, without which 'communities' would cease to exist" (2003, p. 257). This labour and exhaustion resulted in my varying involvement at the court over the decade. Some years I was more present than others. When I felt most supported by others at the court and was not carrying the burden myself, then I was able to give more energy. But there were certainly times that I needed to step away, highlighting the fragility of these networks.

> Alex: Do you remember when, when it was fixed, and when I did start playing again and everyone started playing again. I mean, this is kind of a selfish question, but what were your impressions of me?
>
> Skylah: Right, you were the only female I saw play, and I was like, what? She's playing against these guys? Because like, with me, I used to come in the morning and then play with the morning people, right? And then I know when it's past two, three, I sit down, because I know when Fabrice and them come here, the big guys and stuff, I'm like no, I'm going to sit down, because I know nothing just yet. And when I saw you play, I was like wait, what? She's playing with these guys? And you were scoring on them and I was like wow, what? Ok, I need to work extra hard now. I need to work extra hard. You know, so seeing you play, kind of like, empowered me in a way, because I used to think like nah, it was just for the guys alone. And when I saw you play, I was like, if she can do it, maybe I can do it too? Let me try!
>
> Alex: You definitely can do it too.
>
> Skylah: Let me try! Let me try. So, yeah I started putting in a whole lot of work, coming in the morning, playing with Thabo and them, getting to understand everything else.
>
> Conversation between Alex and Skylah
> 12 January 2022, at the court in Johannesburg
> (Peterson, 2022)

To be a part of a male-dominated sport space as a female is not something new to me - I have been doing this throughout my life. It has always been important to me to enter in a non-threatening way - to adapt and prove that I can be treated exactly as any other athlete in the space. A certain toughness needs to be exhibited, no complaints about being pushed around, no blatant reactions to crass statements (unless directed at me - those I will not tolerate). Arriving at the court in 2011 was no different, and over the years I have been "one of the guys." I was also able to find a way to express my feminine nature as our familial netting developed and we all began to feel more comfortable with each other.

> Alex: Clearly I'm different, I'm white and I'm a woman so there's those two things, like what was that, what was that like at first, did it change, what's it like now?
>
> Mawere: You know, at first when I played with you, I very much remember I was being soft, you know like, she's a girl. But then you were like no, I don't, don't be soft on me, we are playing basketball. I'm like oh she's really hard, she just, let's play basketball. That's what you said, I remember exactly that day.
>
> Mike: Yeah, she actually said the same thing to me. She's like eh, don't be easy on me. And she actually got those shots.
>
> Mawere: Yeah bra.
>
> Mike: The mid range.
>
> Mawere: She will kill you.
>
> Mike: At some point you have to realise like ok.
>
> Mawere: You know, as time went on, people like, people now, they don't treat you like a girl, you're just part of the community, if someone's going to block you, he's going to block you hard. If someone's going to push you, they're going to push you and you don't complain, you just blend in.
>
> Mike: Actually Mawere calls a lot more fouls than you.
>
> Conversation amongst Alex, Mike, Mawere and Chrispen
> 19 September 2020, at Alex's flat in Johannesburg
> (Chawa, Chawa & Mawere, 2020)

Being "one of the guys" has its pros and cons. When I was about seven years old, I had a poster from the ABL[9] that said "Play Like A Girl." This has stuck with me throughout my sports career. Playing well does not mean that you play like a man, you simply play well. At the court and other male dominated spaces, I am always trying to prove that I am not special. Other women play like this too, not just me - I do not "play like a man," though people constantly try to tell me that I do. Excelling in an athletic skill is not something that only men own.

Michael Messner explores this concept in *Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain*, explaining, "To say 'she plays like a man' is a double-edged sword - it is, on the surface, a compliment to an individual woman's skills, but it also suggests that she is so good, she must not be a true woman after all. The outstanding female athlete

9 American Basketball League, a short-lived professional women's basketball league in the U.S., which emerged around the same time as the WNBA

is portrayed as an exception that proves the rule, thus reinforcing traditional stereotypes about femininity" (Messner, 2007, p. 41). Trying to be seen both as a capable athlete and as a "true woman" (whatever that may mean) is a constant struggle in such environments. In high school I dealt with this by having brightly coloured roller hockey equipment when I played with the guys and by leaning into my love of cooking and baking and bringing homemade chocolate chip cookies to the rink. Speaking to Skylah about her involvement at the court echoed a lot of these perceptions.

> Alex: But also I think since you started coming, now there's more and more girls that are coming and they're playing.
>
> Skylah: Yeah, a lot of…
>
> Alex: Like Mpho, and…
>
> Skylah: Yeah a lot of girls are now pulling up, you know even the ones that cannot play. These days, you know it's about like, giving each other a chance. You know like, promoting sportsmanship and stuff. Because when we're here, I think we are all equal. Because I remember, there was this other guy who didn't want me to play this other time. Then I was like, no fam, every time I step on the- because he was like no you are too tiny and stuff, I'm like nah, when I step on the basketball court, I am no longer a girl or a boy, I am a basketball player. Because the way you bounce the ball is the way I bounce the ball. A three-pointer is a three-pointer. A layup is a layup… yeah so, I think people should like, have that mindset, the moment you step on the court, you are not a girl, you are not a boy, you are a basketball player. Because a point is a point at the end of the day.
>
> Alex: Exactly.
>
> Skylah: And so that's how we should treat each other.
>
> Alex: And I've fought for that for so long, like my whole life… it's so cool that other people also feel that way. And sometimes it works out, and sometimes it doesn't.
>
> Skylah: Yeah, sometimes it doesn't, you just gotta try and see how it goes, because you never know the outcome of like, your efforts and stuff.
>
> Conversation between Alex and Skylah
> 12 January 2022, at the court in Johannesburg
> (Peterson, 2022)

The experience of being dismissed due to gender occurs across many fields, not only sport. In regards to Ruth Asawa's art career, LaForce reflects on the gendered experience, "but with hindsight, it is easy to see how Asawa was dismissed. Vogue magazine featured her artwork in 1952 alongside fashion models, who posed in front of the sculptures as if they were accessories. A positive 1955 review of two separate exhibitions by Asawa and Isamu Noguchi in Time magazine referred to Noguchi as a 'leading U.S. sculptor' and Asawa as 'a housewife'" (LaForce, 2020). Even the medium and method to create art can become gendered, with my work in crochet and soft fabric materials potentially being understood as "craft." Asawa's "sculptures, made of wire and by hand, were also often labelled 'craft,' a term that today may carry more positive associations but was still limiting for a woman moving in the same circles as Abstract Expressionists, postmodernists and conceptualists" (LaForce, 2020). The handmade nature of a process perhaps seen as craft allows for a tactile, emotional experience in the production of artwork. Our aspirations at the court towards becoming a community also take an immense amount of focus, feeling and energy.

As this sense of community strengthens and weakens over time, we have embodied Ahmed and Fortier's idea that communities are "never fully achieved, never fully arrived at, even when 'we' already inhabit them. We can therefore think of community as a site lived only through the desire for community, rather than a site that fulfils or 'resolves' that desire" (2003, p. 257). Our "family" was ultimately something that we each desired in some way.

> Denzel: When you cooked dinner and um, you know we are there and we are just talking about life, talking about things we want to do. You know those were very special moments when it comes to, like when it comes to a family, that's what I mean like, if I am to say like my real family, you guys are my family, because I never had those moments with anybody, you know?
>
> Alex: I didn't know that.
>
> Denzel: Yeah, that was so, that's why like, you know, not even just with you, there were times when we have Moses, we have Ella, you know like, even now like, I'm not having moments like that you know? And I miss it so much because those moments that are- I really feel loved. And um, you know it's just like really good moments that I'm really missing right now.
>
> Alex: Well you are loved, just to remind you. And yeah, maybe we will have more of those moments.
>
> Denzel: Of course we will.
>
> Conversation between Alex and Denzel
> 28 August 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Victoria
> (Mutyambizi, 2020)

This family that felt like comfort and enveloping softness developed as a contrast to the hardness of our surroundings. Playing one-on-one and eating dinners together and celebrating birthdays: the transparency and boundaries seemed to fade away in fleeting moments when we were together and able to feel safe and vulnerable amongst each other. "Home" is a piece that I created to reflect upon this feeling of safety and envelopment. While this piece is suspended from a hoop like "Unravel" and "The Cut," the crocheted form serves a different function, allowing the viewer to be embraced from within its cocoon-like shape. It is situated next to the edge of "Unravel," where a similar wool material to the one used in "Home" has been unravelled, demonstrating that this warm, enveloping piece is constructed with something that can be pulled apart easily, expressing that precarity and fragility are never far from moment of safety and security.



‘Home,’ artwork and photograph by Alexandra Cunningham (Cunningham, 2022a)

This warmth and relaxed softness is what I feel when hand crocheting, particularly fluffy, inconsistent, unwieldy material. It comes together quickly and beautifully, with bumps and spaces, but creates something enveloping and comforting. In Pajaczkowska’s text, *Making Known*, she describes plaiting in reference to Kirsten Scott’s research, explaining “Scott also notes the significance of the dynamic between uniformity and irregularity within the hand-made plait, suggesting that while evenness and uniformity in pattern is valued as evidence of skilled craftsmanship, the irregularity in texture is especially valuable as a symbol of the presence of the hand and the (maternal) body or touch” (2015, p. 88). When crocheting, a form of plaiting, I experience a maternal feeling and familial comfort when working with such irregular material. It evokes this feeling of family that I had with Gunz and Denzel. Irregular and lacking uniformity, yet striving towards consistency, strength and durability. Our court community moves forward in this way: building up and unravelling, relentlessly trying to become what we desire.



CHAPTER THREE

NEVA HADDA GUN: THE FRAGILITY OF RELATIONSHIPS



Author's handwritten & collaged reference to "I Got Next / Neva Hadda Gun" by KRS-One (KRS-One, 1997a)
Listen: I Got Next / Neva Hadda Gun: KRS-One

Neva Hadda Gun: The Fragility of Relationships

International basketball culture is one of bravado, of putting on a face of confidence and ease with the game, whether one actually has the skills to back it up or not. This culture parallels the front that one needs to put up in order to survive in Johannesburg's inner city, though this survival looks different for each person. Braggadocio (boastful or arrogant lyricism) is a major theme in much of the hip hop music that features heavily in South Africa's basketball scene (consisting of U.S. and South African artists). This further amplifies the masks and layers built up around the game. Ironically, in my experience at the court, the coming together of these elements is what allows those layers and fronts to fall away, and for deeper connections and more vulnerable selves to be revealed. In this way, an unintentional "community building" has occurred over the years.

In 2020 I created an artwork linked to KRS-One's track "I Got Next / Neva Hadda Gun," which I posted to Instagram with the lyrics, "Can I tell them that I really never had a gun? No you can't cause now you bouts to get done" (KRS-One, 1997a). The track's lyrics start out displaying the dynamics of presenting confidence in urban spaces similar to the court. The track takes a turn, however, to reveal that many in such spaces claim to have power in the form of weapons to back up their bravado, but in reality what lies under the façade is often something more insecure and complex. My identity at the court exists within this context. I talk a big game, but I have never had a gun or physical capability to protect myself if confronted with a perilous situation. What I have developed from the court though, is a group of people who have learned to know who I am beneath boastful claims. Gunz messaged me in response to this artwork and caption on Instagram soon after it was posted, writing, "You had a gun," using the pun with his own name to emphasise the relationships that have supported and protected me over the years (M Mhlanga 2020, pers. comm., 30 April).

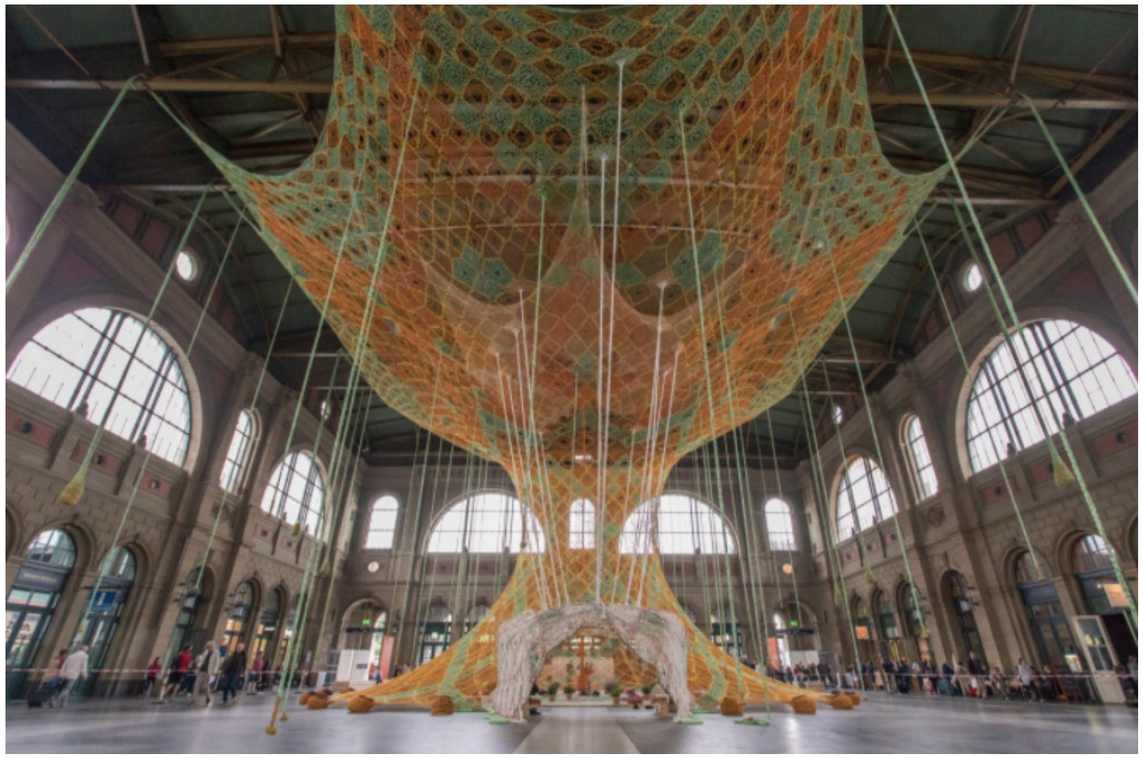
These personal connections, what became my home and family life, was a confusing contrast to my professional life working with private developers and City entities in public spaces. My efforts to bridge community and institutions were constantly a struggle, falling short of anything sustainable. Although I felt that my work was not achieving its intentions, my professional connections with City entities grew. Those connections have resulted in me playing the role of institutional liaison at the court, while simultaneously existing as a basketball player and family member there. Although many positive outputs have come from these overlaps (refurbishing of the court, permission to hold tournaments, access to the space later in the evenings), these wins are still overshadowed by losses and precariousness due to systemic factors related to government[10], infrastructure[11], immigration[12] and private entities[13].

10 The JDA was responsible for the construction and refurbishments of the court and Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo are the owners of the space, responsible for cleaning and maintenance via the Expanded Public Works Programme.
11 City Power and Joburg Water are responsible for lighting, electricity and water at the park - which are often not operational.
12 South Africa's immigration system is fraught with immense challenges for those who migrate here. Lack of legal documentation or inability to renew such documentation or navigate what is even required is a factor that greatly impacts individuals' precarity within social, political and economic contexts.
13 City Parks and the local CID have taken on daily cleaning and security in the space and the Street Traders Association and local recyclers play a huge role in how the larger space around the court operates.

Italo Calvino's writings on cities again come to mind in relation to this tension. In another of Calvino's evocative descriptions, "Thin Cities," an entire city is built suspended between two mountain peaks. Every element of the city is upon catwalks and hammocks. In this, he articulates the fragility that I recognise at the court aptly: "Suspended over the abyss, the life of Octavia's inhabitants is less uncertain than in other cities. They know the net will last only so long" (Calvino, 2012, p. 124). Johannesburg's inner-city embodies this idea that the only certain element is that of uncertainty.

> Alex: Can you remember any like, specific time that you felt like really at home there or really comfortable there?
>
> Denzel: Yeah, I would say, most of the time. But let me see, our first Hoop Mania, right? I was working, I wasn't playing you know? But like, the level of respect I was getting, even though I wasn't playing. It was- it made me feel like I belong, you know? It made me feel like, ok I'm going to work hard to- since I was working, I say I'm going to do my job right and I'm going to make sure next time I'm playing. You know so, it's just those things that make you feel like, when you feel like you belong, you're always going to feel like you're home...
>
> Alex: That's really interesting what you're saying about getting respect. Because I feel like Joburg as a city, especially town, like you're not really respected, you know, like anyone. Like walking through town, yeah no one cares, right?
>
> Denzel: Yeah.
>
> Alex: So to have a space within town, where you do get, you know respect and attention, yeah, that means something.
>
> Denzel: Yeah, that's- you know, like you say, it's really hard to get respect in Joburg, because you know, it's just a fast world, everybody's just: give me, give me that, give me that, so for you to get respect somewhere, it's- you know, that place will be special to you.
>
> Alex: Yeah it's almost like, like you're saying, Joburg is fast, the court is almost like it slows down.
>
> Denzel: Yeah.
>
> Alex: I mean when you're playing of course it doesn't slow down, but like-
>
> Denzel: No, but when you're playing your mind is at ease.
>
> Alex: Yeah, true.
>
> Denzel: You know, so like how I used to do, like you know sometimes I would be at the court, but my mind is not thinking about anything. But when I finish now and when I walk home, that's when I'm like ay, maybe I'm going to get robbed tonight, you see, so now I don't feel safe anymore. But at the court I feel like I'm at home, so I feel very safe. But at the same time, anything could have happened at the court.
>
> Conversation between Alex and Denzel
> 28 August 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Victoria
> (Mutyambizi, 2020)

The inherent nature of fragility amongst us as a court community allows for an understanding that the ties that bind us are all we have. Pajaczkowska explores this need for connection in *Making Known*, describing, "Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1974) suggested that the self is a product of a transitional and transformational emergence from a primary, mammalian



Installation view of Ernesto Neto's 'GaiaMotherTree' at Zurich Main Station (Donoghue, 2021)

dependency to an individuated interdependency, in which the capacity for relatedness is at the centre of the definition of the self" (2015, pp. 81-82). This echoes Barad's concept of intra-action and the sense that our existence is as one component of larger system, dependent upon our sociability. The interdependency makes us stronger, but also means that should a relationship fail, the whole web can unravel and fall apart.

Ernesto Neto creates works using crocheted pieces, many of which are large, immersive installations, including 'GaiaMotherTree' installed at Zurich Main Station in 2018. This work is made of cotton strips in the shape of a tree. In describing the process of making the work and his crocheted works in general, Neto explains, "We have fingers, and fingers teach us; fingers play with us. This is the kind of work we are open to touching, so there is a continuity in the process from where it came from to where it goes. There is an exchange of energy… Touch is good. When we crochet, we touch, we count, we meditate, we pray" (Donoghue, 2021). The physical construction of such interdependencies is similarly evoked in my practice. While the form of these relationships and crocheted textile create something strong and durable and able to conduct a sense of warmth and comfort, they can also very easily unravel.

> Alex: When you left did you feel like you were like, abandoning your kids?
>
> Gunz: I just felt like I just crushed something that, yeah, I was building, slowly building into. I just felt like I just left it all. Yeah, it got to me. Because, you know how it is, like, people come to chill at the court, that vibe was like, no one can take it away from us. So, but when I left I felt like I took it away from them. I just felt sad because I think I used to ask, so you guys are chilling at the court? People are like nah, we're not chilling at the court anymore, you went with it and stuff like that. I feel like I used to make people bond, so when I left people were like, ok there's nothing to do anyway. Yeah, so everything started changing, people started not showing up and stuff like that. You were not around by then I don't think.
>
> Conversation between Alex and Gunz
> 6 September 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Amsterdam
> (Mhlanga, 2020)

Gunz is a key member of the court community and could be considered the godfather of the court. He was at the court even before it was built in 2010, checking in with the construction workers each day after work, asking what day it would open. He was the first one there, and for many, the first point of contact at the court.

> Pule: It was very clear. Gunz had to do what he had to do for these kids, and it worked, they all fucking trusted him, Gunz would die for these kids, you know what I mean? It was impressive. That was my biggest thing, if there's anything that I can highlight from the court it's just the relationship Gunz had with these kids. And the relationship that the kids had with Gunz and then to themselves. And do you know what I mean, it was like a group of gorillas, you know, but not as intense as you know, don't mess with Gunz or whatever. It was just, you know it's Joburg man, it's Joburg, Gunz is a tall big guy, we all ride for each other, and if they wanted to get acceptance from anybody, it was from Gunz, you know what I'm saying? But they were also very independent themselves, they were also, they didn't need Gunz. They would hang out by themselves, they would do this by themselves, you know what I mean? You know on Friday or Saturday, like guys were broke man, they don't have any money and I don't know man, Gunz would work at his warehouse, man Gunz would work his ass off man, and the one thing he would do, he would get beers for the boys, do you know what I mean? Saturday afternoon, you would still look out for your boys, man, you know what I mean? He had his kids, and this and that, he had to take care of his flat or whatever, I think at some point somebody was living with him, one of the guys was working with him or something?
>
> Alex: Mmmhmm.
>
> Pule: But you know, he took care of the guys, you know what I'm saying? Guys who can't afford it, Gunz would bring Castle Lite or something. It was all very magical, and understandable.
>
> Conversation between Alex and Pule
> 30 August 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Munich
> (Mathebula, 2020)

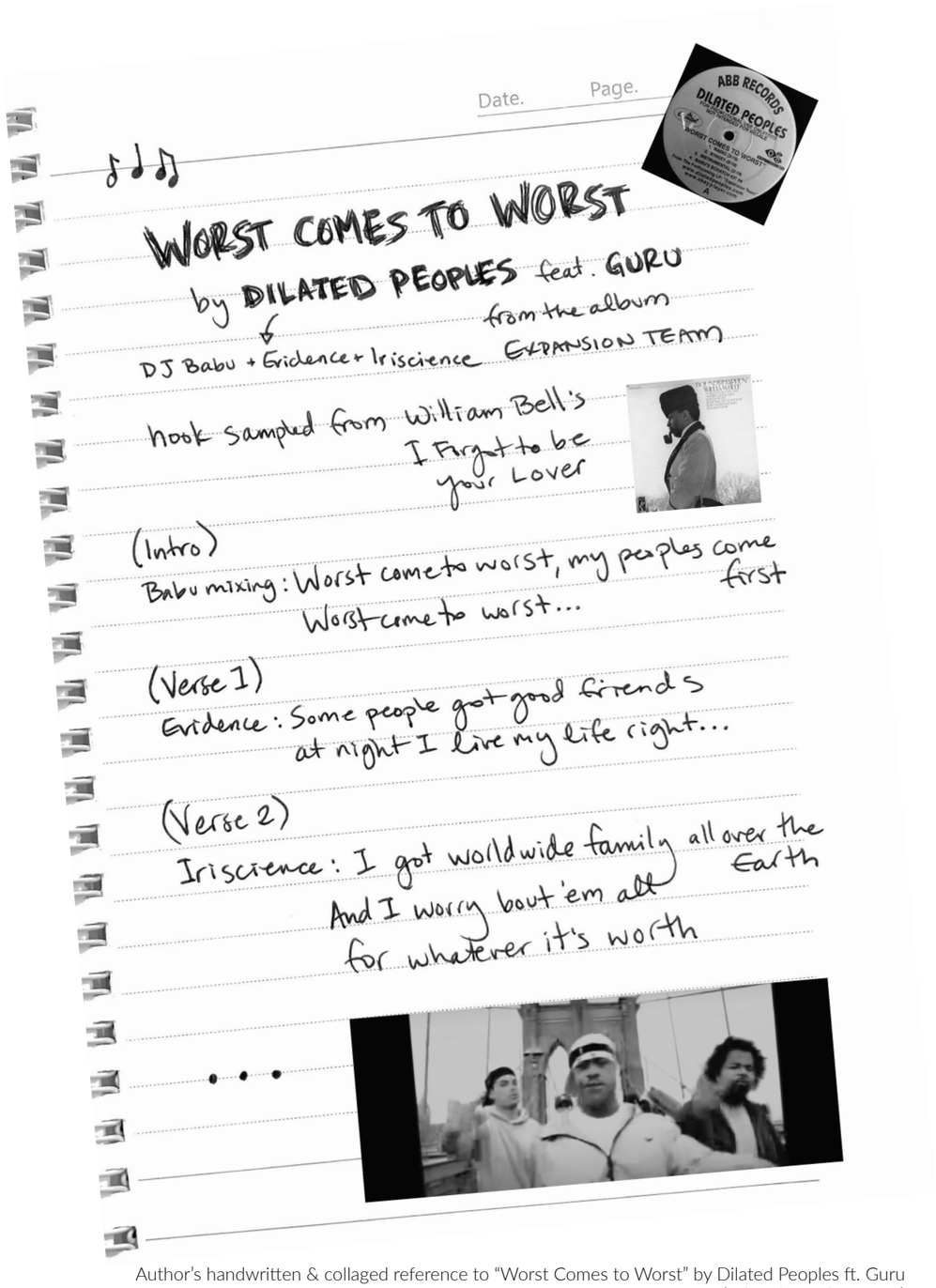
When Gunz stepped away, those threads began to unravel, what had been so strong slowly pulled apart and the fragility was exposed.

> Gunz: Yeah, sometimes people would just come chill there, even though there was no ball to play. People would just come and hang around. So people could just do that, but now the problem was we weren't there so they thought, nah, what will I go there for anyway. It was like we broke up the family.
>
> Alex: Do you think, because, since I left before you, did that influence you at all in like, feeling like you could leave? Do you feel like I abandoned, so therefore, now you had a right to abandon?
>
> Gunz: Nah I didn't feel like that. But there was like, uh, it was like a tire punch, it's still on the car but now this other side is a little bit leaning on the other side, so you need both tires to move. So yeah, if one is down, then yeah we can still move, but it's like yeah, we're not going anywhere. So when you left, then yeah, we were still going to the court, chill, play ball and everything, but it wasn't all the same. So when I left, then I think everyone was like ok it's dead now. So yeah, a lot of people started not hanging out with each other because I used to call and ask, so you guys are doing this, and they were like no, we are not there, I'm somewhere on my own, I don't go to the court anymore and stuff like that, so yeah, I felt like I kind of messed it up.
>
> Conversation between Alex and Gunz
> 6 September 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Amsterdam
> (Mhlanga, 2020)

Crochet and plaiting do not include knots, they include a process of looping and winding which will hold strongly, unless one thread is pulled. They link together but are not bound forever. It is easy to unravel what has been created, but once created, the structure made of the string becomes strong. The repetitive motion: a loop upon loop upon loop upon loop is like our day-to-day interactions: greeting and playing and saying goodbye, greeting and playing, saying goodbye, day in, day out. These loops and repetitions create something, yet the moment that the looping stops, the creation stops as well. The foundation is there and one can always return to it and continue, but that foundation can also be unwound, pulled apart slowly but surely.

CONCLUSION

MY PEOPLES COME FIRST: DEPARTURES AND RETURNS



Author's handwritten & collaged reference to "Worst Comes to Worst" by Dilated Peoples ft. Guru (Dilated Peoples, 2001)
Listen: Worst Comes to Worst: Dilated Peoples ft. Guru

My Peoples Come First: Departures and Returns

In October 2020, I fell at the court awkwardly on my wrist. I kept playing through the pain and proceeded to win a few one-on-one games. It was a Friday after dark - the solar lights we had installed provided visibility, but not as much as the City's lights would have if they were actually functional. I went home, showered and then went out with friends from the court, using the ice from the buckets of beers to ice my wrist. The next morning I got x-rays and had my doctor friends look at them (since, like most of us at the court, I do not have medical aid). Everyone confirmed no break, so I took a reasonable two-week pause and then resumed playing.

But I did not play the same, my wrist would lock up sometimes when I tried to shoot, and my strength in passing and my grip in catching was weak. I continued to play and just see it as a long recovery until April 2021 when I had another fall, landing on my wrist again- almost at the same location on the court. As I always do with pain and injuries in sport, I got up to continue playing. This time my shot was short - by a lot. I knew something was more seriously wrong.

I got another x-ray with the help of friends, and in reading it no one saw any breaks or fractures. Everyone agreed however, that in plain sight, my wrist did not look right. Nevertheless I played in a friendly tournament in Soweto that next day, wrist in a brace. It felt awful, so this time I went to an orthopaedic surgeon who required an MRI, then the radiologist who read it required a CT scan. In short, I spent almost all my savings trying to fix my wrist. It turned out that I had shattered a bone in my wrist, and back in October I had in fact fractured another bone which had been healing over the six months but was still fractured - both not visible on x-ray.

I had a cast for six weeks and took probably the most time off basketball I had since first coming to the court ten years prior. Of course, everyone at the court signed the cast. When it was off I took my time, because now the risk of never using the wrist for anything (writing, art, cooking and of course, basketball) was a very legitimate concern. It has now been about eight months that I have not been at the court as consistently. I play, but have had gentle falls that result in another two weeks off and the fear of never using my wrist again. The orthopaedic surgeon says I now have "abnormal wrist anatomy" that will never be the same. I have completely changed my shot to adapt to a different range of flexibility. When I am unable to play, being at the court makes me sad, so I do not go as much. The frequency, rhythm and routine for me has been ruptured. A shift has occurred.

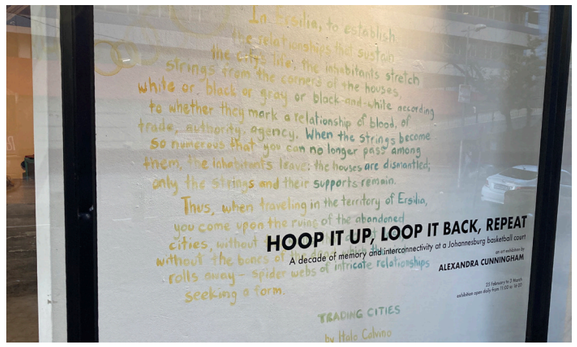
But at the court, in the physical space, those ties that bind are still there. I have become removed from my role as an integral thread of the court, and it is strange for me to be viewing the dynamics from slightly outside. To realise that my closest friends and I are now the old ones - a full decade later. There are teenagers in the space who were young children when we started playing there and they are now able to come back and pick up the threads where we left them, but in a new and different way.

So I have distanced myself. Not fully, but I am learning how to be at the court in a new role, a new capacity. Never apart completely, I fall within Barad's idea of "intra-action," constituted by the court collective, through which I exist as I am today. These relational ties with the court community cannot be easily cut and I will not allow myself to distance for long enough for them to fully unravel. I fear that stepping outside this world removes me from myself and from the networks that have held me up for so long.

There is still an ease in returning to the court, I know that it is an option for me at any time, on any day. I can go back and pick up where I left off, pass through the threshold and enter a separate world. A world that I was once an integral part of, and will always exist as part of the foundations. Simultaneously, I know that my previous relationships are unravelling. I am more comfortable with this experience now, because I have learned that it is the nature of this court, of this space full of people collectively striving to attain the idea of community, where we continually create family and build memories, encounter ruptures, break down, regroup and grow again.

Our specific, yet ever changing locale is there. The loops and hoops and rhythmic nature of each day at the court continues, hovering in that space of knowing that anything can happen here in Johannesburg at any time, whilst concurrently feeling an immense sense of safety and ease. Each day new people encounter the court and step into a world of welcoming people, finding their role and flowing into the intra-actions that make up the ecosystem. I am in the midst of the cut at the moment, hovering in space and stepping out to a degree, yet I am still a part of that amoeba-like colony where we exist as a part of the whole. My role and connections with others at the court remains. I no longer need to be in the physical space to call upon my court siblings for support and vice versa. I am hopeful for what the court and community will mean for future generations, for the individuals stepping in now for the first time. I am confident in our connections: perpetually weaving and creating and striving for the existence of our court family: perhaps never fully achieved, but always a collective aspiration.









'Hoop it up, Loop it back, Repeat' full exhibition view, photographs by Sizakele Angel Khumalo and Alexandra Cunningham (Hoop it Up, 2022)

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