

## Hoop it up, Loop it back, Repeat. A Decade of Memory and Interconnectivity at a Johannesburg Basketball Court

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### Abstract

An inner-city Johannesburg basketball court has served as the backdrop for a decade of intertwining relationships, creating a home away from home and a secondary family for the members of this community. The fence surrounding the space serves as a threshold through which one enters a separate world, distinct from the city that surrounds. The space is reminiscent of a nostalgic hip hop basketball culture, yet also keenly local and unique. The cyclical, repetitive nature of each day at the court allows for the development of deep personal connections and communal safety within the court space. The cuts and ruptures that occur are built into the nature of the culture in the space and while disruptive, are also what allows for growth and change and deeper intertwining. These concepts are explored through conversations amongst court community members and artworks reflecting on this research. While the pivotal elements that develop this community are the people, the physical infrastructure is also key in allowing this day-to-day consistency to lay the groundwork for such a sense of home and belonging.

**Keywords:** basketball court, interconnectivity, crochet, repetition, Johannesburg

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### **Part I: Step Into a World**

The criss-crossing of the chain link fence, 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 and with just one opening to enter the space. And once you pass through, you've 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's 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, a public space 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.

*Author: I think I wanna just start by saying, or asking, like, 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 Author, Mike, Mawere and Chrispen  
19 September 2020, at Author's flat in Johannesburg  
(Chawa, Chawa and 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.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. The fence from within the court, pick-up game, photograph from Author's collection, 2012.

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

*Hoop it up, Loop it back, Repeat*

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. This energy and 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.

*Author: 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.*

*Author: 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, yeah.*

*Conversation between Author and Gunz*

*6 September 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Amsterdam  
(Mhlanga, 2020)*

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. 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. In Benedict Anderson's work on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, he discusses the idea of migration as a way to form bonds: "The 'journey' between times, statuses and places as a meaning-creating experience" (Anderson, 2016, p. 53). 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.

*Author: 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?*

*Author: Yeah.*

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

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 grey 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. As a visual artist, my research and practice reflect upon these remnants and memories: the elements that may be unknown to those within the space now, yet that still 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 “spiderwebs” of relationships still exist in the court space and they rebuild and retwine with new people - people who are not even aware of 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 much 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. It is all of us collectively striving to attain the idea of community, and often falling short, but still trying.

In this research, “we” refers 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<sup>2</sup>. We have come and gone over the years, some play more often than others, some are within 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

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.

As a member of the court community, my research took the form of casual conversations with court community members, music that we associate with the court's basketball culture and my artistic interpretations of these interpersonal dynamics and the court infrastructure that engenders them. The routine and ritual of basketball (the game, space and culture) has allowed me and others to find meaningful connections, becoming "family" to one another.

*Author: That feeling of like, secure, like you just said, feeling secure, feeling safe, feeling comfortable. Why do you think the court is like that? Because everyone says that, everyone says that as soon as you walk through that chain link fence you feel like you're somewhere different.*

*Gunz: Yeah, I think it's 'cause people are happy there. You can see everyone there, the way they will welcome you, yeah, everyone gets comfortable. Plus it's a beautiful place, it's a beautiful place with beautiful people. We know Joburg, it's not, uh, very comfortable, but that court takes everything away. You just see Joburg as heaven when you're at the court because there's nothing to be scared of. People just do their thing - play basketball, they enjoy, get to know one another and stuff, it takes a lot of pressure off people doing things, so yeah people get comfortable coming to the court because they feel relieved, they have something to do.*

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

In my artistic work, crochet, linking and looping are suspended from hoops in a gallery space, evoking the intertwining, soft nature of our relationships. "Step Into a World" is a piece that acts as a threshold upon entering the gallery space, mimicking the fence and also reminiscent of a net. Crochet and embroidery throughout the spaces of the piece paint the memory and history of interlocking and divergence. The piece is meant to confront the viewer, and to move past it and enter the space is like choosing to pass through the opening in the fence at the court and step into a new world.

To further explore this place that exists as the backdrop to this investigation, one must recognize the degree to which a "separate world" has been entered. Using hip hop music that we would play at the court, one can consider KRS-One's "Step Into a World (Rapture's Delight)," which opens with a chilling, high-pitched sound, setting the tone for stepping into a new world. It is significant to understand what that transition means in a cultural context - stepping into a fenced-in court.





Figure 2 (previous page, 3 (this page). Step Into a World, artwork by Author, photographs by Sizakele Angel Khumalo, 2022.

Rap and hip-hop music<sup>3</sup> run parallel to the culture of basketball, particularly in its American-centric context. The music video for the track “Rapture’s Delight” includes scenes of KRS-One outside of a chain-link fence. At this court, rap and hip hop take centre stage. When I asked friends from the court 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 and crew, locale.

This world of 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. The community there is “repped” and defended like a family. 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 seTswana to Lingala to Shona every few minutes create a court space that is both familiar and distinct.



Figure 4. Court community members, photograph from Author’s collection, 2020.

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

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<sup>3</sup> 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.



local neighbourhood 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). In a similar way, most depictions of the court include shots of the collective. 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 many music videos may seem similar, they are also keenly unique.

*Author: 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 like component of the space so significant to you?*

*Pule: Uh, to be honest, I think most of it has to get 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 uh, 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, Junior4, 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?*

*Author: 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. It was an area where, you know it was like being in a zoo, we are the zoo animals, and people from the outside are looking in and seeing how we behave and they can literally see the community of these animals who choose to go into this, into the zoo, into that space because it's a safe space for them. You know?*

*Conversation between Author and Pule  
30 August 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Frankfurt  
(Mathebula, 2020)*

The fantasization of such an environment or scene draws spectators, some pass through the threshold to observe from within, others passing by stop and look through from the

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<sup>4</sup> Not the individual's real name

outside. One memory at the court highlights this concept of a separate world and also speaks to the race and class divide existing in Johannesburg.

*Author: Do you remember, there was one time we were playing, I don't know if you were there and I don't know if I've already asked you about this. But there was like a group of tourists, mostly white people, on some like walking tour, they were walking by and they started taking pictures, so it did very much feel like the zoo thing and someone, I think it was Mawere or Gunz, one of the two or both of them, they went and got their phones and started taking pictures of the people outside. Were you there?*

*Pule: I was there, yeah, I was there.*

*Author: I felt like that was a very like, I don't know, important moment or just like a way of seeing things.*

*Pule: Yeah, for sure, I uh, for me, I can, if, you know, I don't know what was going on through their minds, but um if I was walking through New York somewhere and I saw guys playing basketball, you know, behind a fence, I would feel sort of a moment of magic just like, man I saw this on TV and now it's here in real life, but that would be my reasoning, I don't know what the hell their reasoning was. If it was the zoo thing, if it was 'oh cute little black kids playing ball,' I don't know, who knows. But I would take it a step further and want to go join those guys. Which I don't think those cats wanted to do, they were just being, you know, typical sort of, you know tourists, you know, again, outsiders coming in to take the photo and then bounce. But I remember that, I remember. I don't remember who took the photos, but I remember, there was like yeah, a big group of them, like 9 of them, yeah, they entered from what's that street, from Joubert, yeah from Joubert they were walking across towards Marshalltown side. Um, yeah, but I mean, something must have caught their eye, something must have interested them, that would be, that would be what I would want to find from those cats, why exactly did you find that interesting, because I'm sure wherever you're from, I'm sure you see people playing basketball all the time, I'm sure you don't take pictures of them. What about this space is so different that you want to take pictures of people playing basketball?*

*Author: And through a fence, like not even coming in to take the pictures inside, why do you want to be outside the fence?*

*Pule: Yeah exactly, so you see that fence plays a big part, plays a big role, plays a big role. Um and I don't see it as a negative thing. I don't see the role it plays as a negative thing, but I guess it's up to the individual to sort of translate the fence however they see it.*

*Author: Definitely.*

*Conversation between Author and Pule  
30 August 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Frankfurt  
(Mathebula, 2020)*

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 is physically 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.

My research and practice on this topic intend to continue to call the frame into question and to look at the court from my viewpoint as a member of the family - as a network of intertwining complex relationships that serve as the foundation for genuine connection and support. Both viewing the court through the frame or threshold that surrounds it and also moving past that threshold and into the deeper connections. 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 by becoming aware of these thresholds, intangible webs and safety nets that are formed amongst people in public spaces, then those with power over the development of such spaces<sup>5</sup> can better allow groups and by default, individuals to develop and thrive.

## **Part 2: Day-to-Day Repetition**

*Author: Yeah, ok um, do you have any specific memories of a moment when you were at the court and you felt very much at home?*

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<sup>5</sup> The development I refer to includes public physical infrastructure, various forms of community accountability and adjustments to formal policing, cleaning and maintenance etc.

*Hoop it up, Loop it back, Repeat*

*Skylah: Every single day. Every single day. This is like, no matter where I am, I could be coming back from PTA around 5, 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 Author and Skylah  
12 January 2022, at the court in Johannesburg  
(Peterson, 2022)*

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) is what defines the atmosphere and makes it a home. The music prevalent in the space is hip hop and rap, predominately 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. Such rhythm and patterns are visually present at the court as well: the chain on the hoop, the holes in the bins, the chain link fence. The relational dynamics can also be metaphorized as repetitive chains, loops, weaving and knotting.

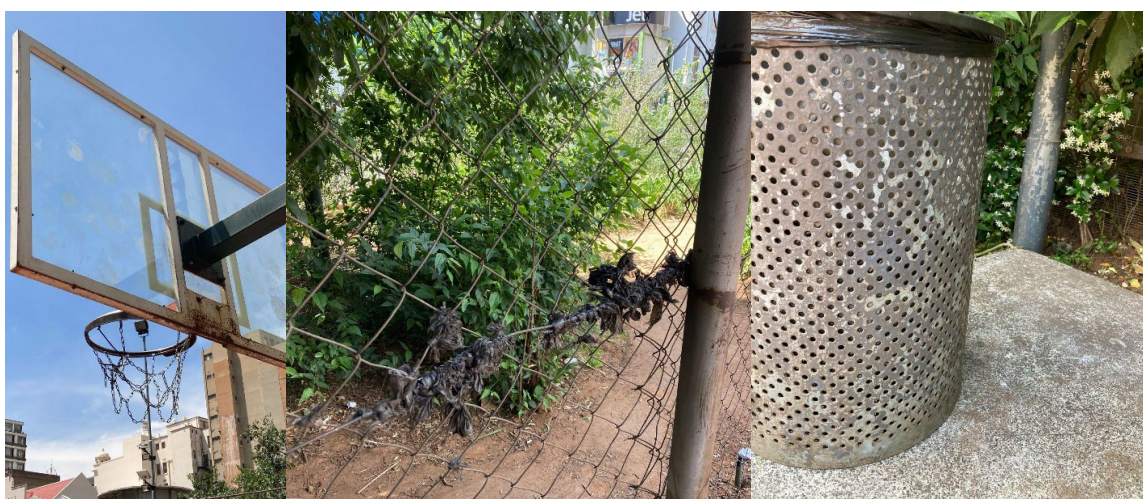


Figure 5-6-7. Pattern and repetition at the court, photographs by Author, 2021.



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 full cultural expression of an environment brings together the individuals to see it as a shared experience, a unique identity in 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 include 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 outside 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 build together to create a sense of community.

*Author: Um, 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, it's, 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, um, the guys would come back to my crib, and uh 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, um, I think it was a Saturday, yeah, and I brought an extension cord, yeah, this did happen a few times, Author. 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.*

*Author: Yeah, but not often, I 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.*

*Author: 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?*

*Hoop it up, Loop it back, Repeat*

*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, um, 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, I know what you mean.*

*Conversation between Author and Pule*

*30 August 2020, telephonically between Johannesburg and Frankfurt  
(Mathebula, 2020)*

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 3 on 3 in which games are played to 7 points, then the winning team takes on the next team outside until there are no more teams. Then things dissolve into 1 on 1 or shooting around until it is decided to leave and lock up<sup>6</sup>. 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 music, is in the rhythmic and percussive density and organization” (1994, p. 65). 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 this 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.

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 develop and become 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.

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<sup>6</sup> The locking up comes and goes depending on our relationship with the CID (City Improvement District) management - at times we are kicked out at a predetermined locking time.



Figure 8. Unravel, artwork by Author, photograph by Sizakele Angel Khumalo, 2022.

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.

I hand crocheted and wove together the pieces in this 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 “Unravel,” I was able to quickly hand crochet a series of looping patterns of various types of yarn and linking together chain. 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. I feel that it mimicked the muscle memory involved in 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 instructions connected to this piece are for the viewer to pull on the loose end of the string, 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 in the space change, yet the nature of the interactions is still there, an amorphous community that philosopher 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 in developing 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 a similar phenomenon amongst our court community, one in which our interconnectivity is in fact 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 original court community members came to the court in 2020 after a while away and joined the (relatively new) WhatsApp group, and despite the many new names and faces, found that same sense of home.

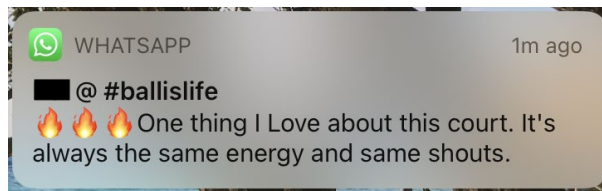


Figure 9. Whatsapp group text: 9 April 2021, Screenshot by Author

### 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 echos 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 from Shady - ‘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 known as “Ice Cream” after 5 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.





Figure 10-11. The Cut, artwork by Author, photographs by Sizakele Angel Khumalo, 2022.

These 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 and when developing the pieces for this body of work, I at times made larger gaps or smaller gaps intentionally 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 and stitch and pattern I choose to make for each element is what allows any of these concepts to emerge from the material.

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.

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. Something core to our court experience.

### **Return to Rhythm**

After a disruptive event, people involved may stay away from the court. There is a shift, but there’s also an unspoken consciousness that the rhythm of the court allows for the return of any of its member. 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.

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, and continual striving to improve and win.

Returning to the visuals and patterns at the court, the chain of the hoop netting and the intertwining of the fence literally surround and centre the space. Rose also comments on such 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). One can take that same thread that creates the structure to create the break and then to revisit a structure again.

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, it must be argued 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.



Figure 12. Court community members before the renovations, photograph by Author, 2019.

This situation echoes 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). At the court, there was a period of deterioration from 2016-2019 where the court physically fell apart, but also core members of the community faded away. Gunz moved to Europe, I moved to the USA 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 hadn’t seen each other in years came back for a community meeting, people spent time at the court again before the renovation began. We weren’t 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.

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 also necessary as the backdrop that allows a separate world to develop.

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