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Who's Got Next?
Social Integration at a Public Park Basketball Court

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

by

Michael Francis DeLand

2014

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Who's Got Next?
Social Integration at a Public Park Basketball Court

by

Michael Francis DeLand
Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology
University of California, Los Angeles, 2014
Professor Jack Katz, Chair

This dissertation examines the ongoing formation of a public park as a particular type of public place. Based on four years of in-depth participant observation and historical and archival research I show how a pickup basketball scene has come to thrive at Ocean View Park (OVP) in Santa Monica California. I treat pickup basketball as a case of public place integration which pulls men out of diverse biographical trajectories into regular, intense, and emotional interactions with one another. Many of the men who regularly play at Ocean View Park hold the park in common, if very little else in their lives.

Empirical chapters examine the contingencies of the park's historical formation and the basketball scene's contemporary continuation. Through comparative historical research I show how Ocean View Park was created as a "hidden gem" within its local urban ecology. Then I show that the intimate character of the park affords a loose network of men the opportunity to sustain regular and informal basketball games. Without the structure of formal organization men arrive at OVP explicitly to build and populate a vibrant gaming context with a diverse array of

others. Through forming teams, developing strategy, and enforcing rules players at the park construct the very context in which they mix together.

Through this portrait of pickup basketball at Ocean View Park I show how the integrative potential of a public place is held in a fragile balance. In its historical formation, the park was created to provide public access but without being so open that the scene would be undone by the chaos of the public sphere. The network of men who participate mix up together but never integrate so completely that they efface their differences and become a uniform social group. The outcome is a form of park use in which a Buddhist philosophy enthusiast, Israeli immigrant carpenter, a black hip hop band leader, a white real estate developer, and a Latino bar tender arrive at the park to build, populate, and dwell together inside a vivid gaming context before bidding farewell and re-entering their separate biographical trajectories. Accounting for pickup park use as a form of social integration has important implications for understanding urban social life well beyond the particulars of the case.

The dissertation of Michael Francis DeLand is approved.

John Heritage

Jeffrey Prager

Jason Throop

Jack Katz, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

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Chapter 1

Introduction: A physical and social ecology

Sitting in my car on the east side of Barnard Way in Santa Monica, California, I quietly took in the scene. Barnard is a two lane street that runs parallel to the Santa Monica beachfront. Behind me, the street hits the Santa Monica-Los Angeles municipal border and turns sharply inland toward Santa Monica's Main Street, a popular stretch of restaurants, bars, shops, and art galleries. In front of me Barnard slices between massive beach parking lots on the west and a series of condominiums and homes on the east. Further north Barnard pushes toward the Santa Monica Pier and its iconic ferris wheel. This was a cloudy winter morning and although it would get into the upper 60s by that afternoon, the temperature was hovering in the mid-50s. We're spoiled in Santa Monica. It's rarely too cold to play basketball outdoors. Anything below 70 degrees feels like an absolute imposition. On this morning I was wearing a wool beanie and sweat pants over my basketball shorts, feeling rather bundled in my car. I sipped on a cup of coffee and listened to the radio as I observed the quiet hum of sociality that I knew would shortly grow into a full blown orchestra.

Looking to my right through the passenger window I saw Ocean View Park's empty green field and rolling concrete walking paths. A few seagulls and crows bounced around the park's large grass viewing mound. Concrete paths circle the mound providing access to bikers, skateboarders, and senior citizens who might struggle to climb the grassy hill. Children on the other hand love to race up the sides of the hill and peer triumphantly to the west where they can see ocean waves crashing on the beach. The viewing mound stands as evidence of a series of societal responses to the transcendent meaning of the ocean and the waves. As that natural ecological feature where ocean meets land, the meaning of the beach itself has shaped a complex

history which has facilitated just this ocean view in just this park for just those people who spend their time here.

Figure 1 – Ocean View Park’s grass lawn and viewing mound



That morning the mound was occupied by a solitary white man sitting on a bench at the top of the hill. I watched him enjoying the ocean view. Holding his dog’s leash in one hand and a cell phone to his ear, he peered west across Barnard way. He looked across the beach parking lot, across the concrete jogging path, across the sand, to the seemingly infinite Pacific Ocean beyond. From my vantage point I could see the two Santa Monica Shores apartment towers rising behind him. Beyond those towers I knew that local residents strolled up and down Main Street heading to or from their favorite coffee shop. The street was once considered the skid row of West Los Angeles but has now transformed into a quaint and largely upscale shopping

destination. While that street is just a short block away from the park, the apartment towers serve as a physical and visual blockade keeping the social life of the park and the commercial strip almost entirely separate.

Before long the man on the cell phone shuffled down the grassy hill, careful not to slide on the grass still wet with dew. He walked west toward the beach, crossed Barnard Way, and turned south onto the sidewalk which will lead him toward Santa Monica's southern municipal border and the iconic Venice Beach boardwalk. After his departure several gulls and crows flew to the top of the hill, apparently trained to explore spaces vacated by humans in search of scraps.

Figure 2 – Beach parking lot across the street from OVP



I looked left out my car window. Across Barnard and beyond the enormous beach parking lot I saw a few people congregated outside of a public restroom. One woman in a sweat

suit was stretching her hamstring with her leg propped up on a cement divider which separates the sand from the jogging path. She took off jogging falling in line behind an endless stream of bike riders, walkers, skateboarders, dog walkers, and joggers who move down the path toward Venice Beach and up the path toward the Santa Monica pier. Palm trees placed equal distances apart gave coherence to my view of the horizon where the grey sky was meshing into the dark blue morning water.

I turned my attention away from the mound and look ahead to what is, for me, Ocean View Park's main attraction: a single paved blue basketball court. The court sits level with the street but its western sideline is lined with a small grass incline which provides a pleasant place to watch the action or, looking to the west across Barnard an unhindered view of the Pacific. The incline also serves to shield the court from the street protecting one from the other. Stray basketballs often fly toward the grass incline, roll up the hill, and bounce harmlessly back to the players below. While it keeps basketballs in, it also blocks the incoming ocean breeze and visual access for those walking and driving on Barnard Way. While immediately adjacent to one another, the social life of the court and the surrounding beach traffic are kept relatively insulated from each other by the design.

The eastern sideline is also protected from a separate social world. It is lined with a fence which blocks the basketball court from the tennis courts below. As if taking a lesson from the western sideline, the fence is lined with a dark wind screen that prevents any regular line of site between basketball and tennis players. Standing on the basketball court's blue concrete, one gains an air of privacy. Though by no means impenetrable the physical surroundings create a little ecological bubble that helps sustain the sanctity of the social scene which occupies it.

For now that bubble was all but empty. The inevitable hum of activity would take some extra time to start up on a cold morning like this one. I noticed Dan stretching his muscles on the far end of the court. Having leaned his guitar case against the chain link tennis fence, he looked calm, quiet, and inconspicuous lying flat on his back, wrapped in sweatshirts. Small, tight dreadlocks poked out the back of his wool beanie which keeps his head warm. Whether on or off the court Dan is a soft spoken man. He'll nod politely when other players eventually arrive, shaking hands with anybody who offers, but he rarely goes out of his way to engage others. Though it's not immediately clear by appearance, those who regularly play basketball at Ocean View Park know Dan to be homeless. Rumors circulate about Dan's days as a local high school super star. In a high profile tournament he supposedly scored 30 points against Gary Payton, one of the best defenders to ever play in the NBA. As legend has it Dan's career was undone by a high school coach who played favorites and a brief college career that took him too far from home and the structure of family life. Anybody who asks Dan about his past, however, is generally met with an uncomfortable shrug and bashful smile. Though he can't physically perform the way he used to his uncanny passing ability and high arcing jump shot stand as a testament to a rich basketball past.

Dan's presence at the park foreshadowed an incoming tide of men who would congregate to play informal games of "pickup" basketball in Ocean View Park. With no formal organization instituting a starting time, the arrivals trickled in. Still sitting in my car I realized that I was not, in fact, the only one watching the court from a distance. I noticed Matt's station wagon parked a few cars ahead of me on Barnard. I could see the back of his head in the driver's seat and Jeff dangling his arm out the passenger window with a lit cigarette in his fingers. They're childhood friends, both born and raised in the working class section of southern Santa Monica. On

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings, it's rare that at least one of them isn't at the park to "hoop." While they were there to play ball, there was clearly no rush.

I spotted Julio driving south on Barnard directly toward me. As he passed my car he nodded and waved, slowing slightly to look for an open metered parking spot on the eastern side of the street. Seeing all the spots taken he accelerated again and in my rear view mirror I saw him whip a quick and illegal u-turn in the two lane road, no small task in his giant pickup truck. As he drove north once again, he slowed to a halt as he pulled even with my car. I rolled down my window letting in the cool ocean air. "What up Mike!" he called out. "We gonna get a game today?" I told him that I was pretty sure that we would. In fact I hadn't even considered the possibility that the pool of players would fall short of 10, the magic minimum quorum that allows for a full court game of 5-on-5. "Alright yeah," he said, "Have you heard from D? Tell his ass to get out here!"

Figure 3 – OVP basketball court and street parking on Barnard Way



He was referring to Dominik, another regular player who often catches rides with me to the court from our respective inland Los Angeles neighborhoods. Julio knows that I'd be likely to know Dominik's whereabouts. "I hit him earlier," I responded, "but haven't heard back." Julio nodded and continued, "Shit well I gotta get out of here by 1. Hope we can get a game going soon! I'll be back." Without waiting for a response he accelerated heading north on Barnard passed Matt and Jeff. He drove toward the entrance to the beach parking lot which sits opposite the park on the west side of the street. In front of me Jeff raised his cigarette hand out the passenger window, waving to Julio as he drove by.

As the morning wore on less time passed between each next arrival. I spotted Steven walking toward the basketball court from the North. He's a student at the local junior college and lives just a couple blocks away. It was winter break at school so I wasn't surprised to see him. He tossed a basketball casually back and forth between his hands as he approached the court in a red, white, and blue team USA basketball sweatshirt. Steven waved to Dan as he walked by but chose a spot about 20 yards away from him to sit quietly with his back against the chain link tennis fence.

I looked down at my phone. Still no word from Dominik who works as bar-back at an expensive hotel bar in Hollywood. I figured he had a late shift last night and presumed that I'd hear from him later in the day. But while in my phone I noticed that I had a text message from Adam from about 5 minutes ago. He lives just a few blocks inland from the park in Santa Monica's most southwesterly neighborhood of Ocean Park. I told him the previous day that I'd be playing at the beach and I knew he was trying to decide whether to make the walk down to play a game. His text message simply asked, "What's it look like out there?" I let him know that people were just starting to arrive and he said he'd see me shortly after finishing up a few

work emails. Adam works out of an office in downtown Los Angeles as a salesperson for UPS. Occasionally he can work from home and fit in a weekday morning basketball game.

Next I noticed a large white van parked in front of Matt's station wagon, a sign that Joseph was nearby. A 60 year old Israeli immigrant, Joseph installs hard wood floors in homes all over Southern California. When he has a morning off he often comes to the beach to swim in the ocean, shoot around, and occasionally play in a full court game when his body feels up to it. Since I hadn't actually seen him yet I assumed he was in the ocean and wondered whether or not he'd actually play basketball today- that is, whether he could be counted toward the requisite ten players. Though the speed and athleticism of the games can sometimes be too much for Joseph, on a day with so few players we may well need him just to play a game. And when he's needed Joseph rarely disappoints.

I looked out to the court again and saw that Steven had left his backpack against the fence and started firing up practice jump shots on the southern basket. Dan continued stretching. Still sitting in my warm car, I counted the players at the park: Dan, Steven, Jeff, Matt, Julio, Joseph (maybe), Adam was on his way, and me. That was eight. Despite the appearances of the near empty court, we were 80% there. Two more players and we'd have ourselves a game.

I figured it was time to move my car. Though the parking spots in front of me and behind me were metered, I'd been sitting in an emergency vehicle zone hoping that another beach goer would come move their car and leave a spot for me. I learned this trick from Matt who's been doing it for years. The emergency vehicle zone on Barnard is a great vantage point for waiting- you can see the court, the ocean, the metered spots, and you won't get a ticket so long as you stay close by. But no luck that day. I resigned myself to the beach parking lot up the road which, for a nominal fee, provides consistent parking across the street.

As I pulled out of the emergency vehicle zone and drove toward the lot I reflected on how much my relationship to the park has changed. I first played basketball at Ocean View Park nearly 10 years ago as an undergraduate at UCLA. I began taking field notes as part of an undergraduate fieldwork internship. My notes from those days are littered with references to shirt colors and other arbitrary markers that identify men and their actions. They are also full of moments of insecurity and feelings of being on the outside. I listened to conversations more than I participated I generally tried to stay out of the way, happy to just have access to a regular and vibrant park game.

I'd ask players how long they'd been playing at the park and how they knew one another. The answer to the first question was pretty constant: they'd been hooping at the park for a long time. The answer to the second question varied greatly: they knew each other from their childhood, from high school, from living or working nearby, from college, "just" from hooping, or all of the above. It was generally hard for players to summarize their relationship to the other men at the park. Nearly a decade later, the whole scene has slowed slightly. The men only come to play three days a week rather than five and on cloudy winter days it can be a struggle to get ten players to the park. Some of the men are the same but others have disappeared. Players today occasionally discuss the whereabouts of players from the past, giving evidence of just how long this park has held an important place in their lives.

Even more than the scene changing, however, my relationship to it has changed. I used to sit at the empty court wondering whether other players would arrive. On this day I was using a parking trick learned from a court veteran and looking at the court occupied by two men and knowing that eight players were really present. By recognizing cars, personal routines and

rhythms, and through text messages and personal contacts I could see the day of basketball was already underway.

By some sociological magic, the unknown chaos of the public sphere has been stabilized for me at Ocean View Park. Previously unknown others are now known. And so am I. My basketball skill level is known, my athleticism is known, my injuries are known, features of my biography are known, and my quality and style of life are known. When unknown others arrive it's not long before we know each other too. But none of the mixing at the park occurs through formal organization operating behind our backs. There is no membership process, no participation fee, no uniforms, no officials or referees, and no power hierarchy or leadership structure pulling the strings. Like a jazz combo playing without a director, there is something improvisational about "pickup" park use. Players arrive independently, mix up in intensely physical, emotional, and moral ways, and then bid each other farewell until the next day of "hoop". Newcomers with sufficient understanding of the scene can get themselves into the action, potentiating the possibility that they too will become known by others. As a result men with otherwise disparate biographical trajectories and life experiences hold the park in common. They congregate, play, argue, compete, and eventually transform who they are to one another. In this dissertation I treat "pickup" park use (and pickup basketball in particular) as a case of public place integration and analyze the sociological contingencies which facilitate its continued existence at Ocean View Park.

By the time I left my car in the beach parking lot that morning and walked back across Barnard to the park itself, the court had begun to buzz. A number of recent arrivals were now casually shooting practice shots with Steven on the southern basket. Jeff had found his way out of Matt's car and set up two beach chairs at the top of the grass incline along the western

sideline. Though still alone in the corner of the court, Dan's stretching routine had become more active, bouncing up and down on his toes. I knew Joel was milling about somewhere because his battery powered stereo system sat on the sideline blasting roots reggae rhythms. In the midst of his warm up Steven swished three consecutive shots in a row through the net. His jump shot has a herky-jerky motion that looks awkward, but anybody playing here long enough knows to not underestimate it. Steven has shot more talented teams right off the court. Jeff didn't fail to notice and, referring to him by his nickname, called out, "Okay Youngster, I see you got it going today. You better hope I'm not guarding you though! That's all I'm saying!" Steven turned, smiled, and shrugged bashfully. The day's beginning was coming to an end.

The scene, the rhythm, and the fieldwork

As a mechanism of public place integration, the basketball game at Ocean View Park follows a relatively stable pattern and rhythm. The randomness of life in public is reduced as players arrive at this marked off public space with a particular idea of how things will go and what to expect. Each time those expectations are confirmed they can feel a little more confident in the kind of experience they will have on their next visit to the park. The games typically begin between 10 and 11am on every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. They run for as long as there are enough people still interested and willing to play.

A game of basketball is an immense practical achievement. It requires attracting players to a court, making teams, developing strategy, keeping score, enforcing rules, managing non-players and fans, organizing transitions between games, and many other tasks. In pickup games these tasks are ongoing accomplishments of the players themselves. For instance, without uniforms players must remember their teammates and become skilled at monitoring the movements of others to distinguish between friendlies and foes. Accomplishing this and other

practical requirements creates a consistent and coherent sequence, form, and narrative arc to the interactions which bring unknown others together. And when a single day of pickup basketball ends, the slate is wiped clean and the players must do it all over again on the next occasion of play.

The first game of a day begins soon after 10 players arrive at the court as they progressively show themselves ready to play. The first 10 arrivals typically play in the first game. Two teams of five are formed either through a collective discussion of what would be fair or a picking procedure organized by players who agree to serve as captains. Arrivals 11 through 15 then get together and form the “next” team in line to play against the winner of the first game. As more players arrive the sideline queue builds.¹ Losing teams step off the court and re-enter the queue from the back of the line. The queue, however, is not physically visible as players scatter across the sideline when they are out of play. They make verbal claims to spots in forthcoming games and expect others to respect those claims as they go about socializing, stretching, talking on the phone, or shooting practice shots. Monitoring and sustaining this first-come-first-serve system thus requires constant interactive work.

The day of basketball proceeds through a series of games. The first game and last game of the day are played to 13 points, all other games to 11. Made baskets count for one point with the exception of shots that come from behind the painted “three point” arc (about 20 feet away), which count for two points. Arguments and disputes often break out during the game as players debate the score, the rules, or precisely what happened in a given play. Games are also occasionally put on pause when a player needs to tie a shoe, answer a phone, feed the parking

¹ See chapter 4 of this dissertation and Jason Jimerson’s work (1999) for a more sustained examination of team formation in pickup basketball.

meter, or “hit the blunt”- smoke marijuana wrapped in a tobacco leaf, part of some players’ basketball routine.

Some players come late and others leave early. Regulars occasionally stop by with no intent of playing at all. But for those hanging out on the sideline the basketball games sustain their interest over the course of the day. They comment on the action, evaluate the performance, and crack jokes about humorous moments and failed attempts. The men sometimes talk about the struggles in their lives- divorce, lost jobs, and frustrating wives and girlfriends. But by and large they leave outside drama out of the park as an aura of relaxation and recreation takes over. They chat casually about nights on the town and previous nights’ sporting events. But it is the park games that provide the narrative structure for their time together.

The men who frequent the games at Ocean View Park are diverse by almost any sociological measure. They are largely black, white, and Latino. Asian players occasionally find their way to the court but are much less common. In terms of age, the men range from 19 years old to over 60. Some have played competitive high school, junior college, and division 1 NCAA basketball. Others have never played a minute of organized basketball in their life. Some men grew up in Santa Monica, Venice, or Los Angeles while others are transplants from all over the country (and world). Especially during the summer months, tourists to the region will occasionally find their way into the game even when their English language skills are limited.

The socio-economic status of regular participants varies widely as well. Homeless men play but so does an ER doctor, a wealthy restaurateur, and an actor whose career has gone from commercials, to recurring television roles, to high profile movie parts and appearances on late night network talk shows. Some players hustle away from the park to make drug deals while others hustle back home to take care of their kids so their wife can go to work. Many work in the

restaurant or bar industry as waiters, bar tenders, security, or managers. A few are musicians and hip-hop emcees with recurring gigs at local venues. One thing that all these professions and lifestyles have in common is that they allow for a flexibility of schedules during weekday hours. On this front my status as a graduate student was no different.

While my first game at the park was nearly a decade ago, I have been playing multiple times a week at Ocean View Park for the past 4 years. I would often go to a nearby café early in the morning to do graduate work before fitting in a couple games of basketball. I became a voracious fieldnote writer. After playing I would immediately start jotting notes on my phone or on small note pads scattered around my car. Upon returning to the computer I would often spend anywhere from two to four hours describing everything I could remember. I described the way teams were formed, the trash talk, the disputes, my own moments of insecurity and triumph, the styles and strategies of play, as well as the jokes and the banter. As I became more comfortable at the park and with my role as a researcher I began bringing a video camera and recording some of these interactions.

As I built relationships with other court regulars I began hanging out with them away from the park as well. This was especially easy during summer months when my school obligations were reduced. We would get lunch after the games and walk across the street to the sand and ocean. Occasionally we would go to a nearby liquor store for cold beers and red plastic cups to hide our consumption from the life guards. We'd jump in the ocean to cool off and sometimes hang out at the beach all the way to sunset. I've watched NBA and college games with them, gone to their barbeque parties, helped them move apartments, eaten dinner with their families and girlfriends, given rides to and from the park, and eaten at their restaurants. I've spent many nights at a local music venue watching some of the most regular and veteran players

perform together in a band. Within the last year several players and I have organized a team to play together in a men's night league at a nearby high school.

Through this fieldwork I also became interested in Ocean View Park as a physical place situated in a particular ecological relationship to the coast, to Santa Monica, and to the surrounding Los Angeles neighborhoods. There seemed to be something unique about this particular park and the sense of relative privacy that it creates for the men who get together for an intimate and playful experience in public. To understand how the park was created as part of the larger urban form, I began digging into the historical "career" of the park's formation. This research demanded that I conduct historical interviews with local politicians and activists. I collected thousands of pages of legal and municipal documents as well as newspaper accounts of the park's formation. All of these sources allowed me to piece together a history of public place formation. Ultimately the integrative experience at the Ocean View Park basketball court is grounded in and made possible by a series of social processes which unfolded independently of contemporary users, setting up the local social ecology which is now extremely meaningful in their lives.

Before engaging an analysis of the contingencies of public place integration at Ocean View Park in the empirical chapters, I first turn to a more conceptual and theoretical discussion of social integration.

Perspectives on Integration

At its core the case study of pickup basketball at Ocean View Park is about a fundamental and ever-present tension in social life between the public and the private. Specifically it is a story about how one publicly owned and publicly accessible place has come to feel known, organized, and stable for an amorphous "group" of men who gather and play together. Where

the public sphere is often experienced as unknown, chaotic, fleeting, and strange, the basketball court at OVP gains a sense of intimacy and stability for players. That shift, facilitated by playing basketball, is both cause and consequence of social integration. Integration is an old concept in sociology and, I'll argue, is one in need of some reformulation.

The concept of segregation is relatively more straightforward. Living in separate neighborhoods, going to separate schools, and hanging out in separate public places, groups of people without meaningful contact can straightforwardly be understood as living segregated lives. But what degree and what style of contact should properly count as integrative? We need to distinguish different styles and degrees of integration in order to measure it against the state of absolute separation of demographically distinguishable populations. Then we need to re-think the descriptive methods that will help us account for its occurrence in social life. I first review two different sociological treatments of integration.

Integration as Proximity

One type of inquiry into social integration takes a demographic standpoint, treating individuals as a collection of identity variables and seeking those social and historical contexts in which people with different values are pushed up against each other. Integration is treated as a relatively static state: institutions and neighborhoods “are integrated” when people with different identities are members or residents. In order to study large population trends, these inquiries typically reduce integration to mere proximity between people understood as different.

Most commonly they ask whether (and how) members of different racial or ethnic groups share the same neighborhoods, churches, or schools (Denton 1995; Emerson, Chai, and Yancey 2001; Emerson and Kim 2003; Lewis, Emerson, and Klineberg 2011). In a world organized very strictly around the separation of people along demographic variables, the integration-as-

proximity approach has had important policy consequences. Demographic researchers have gone great lengths to show how the separation of ethnic groups exacerbates inequality between them (Massey 1990). If separate is consistently unequal, then it is certainly important to understand the historical patterns through which mixing occurs across lines that were previously extremely rigid. While this approach has been extremely important to public policy and the history of sociological research, it simplifies social reality in two important ways.

One risk of the integration-as-proximity approach is that it ignores the axes of meaningful integration to the research subjects themselves. Without access to the life worlds of the participants scholars presume to know which variables matter. Looking at survey data on religious congregations, for instance, it may make perfect sense to characterize a church with equal numbers of black and white congregants as integrated. But suppose that the church is made entirely of biracial couples. Suddenly the meaning of attending an “integrated” church is much different if every individual lives in an equally “integrated” household. For those congregants what might be experienced as more integrative is the moment in which they incorporate a gay or lesbian couple, a Latino family, a homeless man, a religious convert, or a non-English speaker into their midst.

Indeed, the level of ethnic and racial diversity at Ocean View Park is not particularly unusual in the lives of many of the men who participate regularly. Many live in racially diverse households, romantic relationships, neighborhoods, and occupational settings. So from the outside what appears to be an “integrated” park is something very different when understood from the standpoint of the men who organize their lives around interracial interactions more generally.

A second risk of this approach is that it doesn't account for the possibility that within institutions and neighborhoods people can live segregated social lives regardless of their proximity. A neighborhood may be extremely diverse according to the census but if members of different ethnic groups live completely separate social lives, then the significance of the neighborhood as "integrated" is very different. Suttles (1968), for instance, describes the patterns of social life at a public park in Chicago which is frequented by a variety of ethnic groups who sustain strictly segregated patterns of use. A demographic survey of park users might show an integrated park, contradicting local understandings of its social character. When proximity presupposes a "melting pot" process, we risk a highly simplified version of the reality that is lived on the ground.

Structural Integration and Exchange

A second important sociological approach to the study of integration comes from functionalist theory in which integration refers broadly to the relationship between the whole social system and its constituent parts (Feldman 1968; Holzner 1967; Parsons 1951). The "whole" is marked out as distinct from the surrounding environment precisely because of stable relationships between parts which maintain its unity. Beginning from a presumption of a recognizable whole integration describes the internal coherence of the system structure (Holzner 1967:53-54).

An important application of this theoretical sensibility comes from exchange theorists interested in the development and maintenance of small groups. For them integration is not simply a matter of proximity. It is the social psychological process characteristic of all groups as former outsiders become group insiders. Integration, in this sense, is critical to and naturally occurring in any kind of social group. As all members become old timers and age out of active

membership, the process of creating new members is essential for sustaining group structure. For exchange theorists, integration describes that process.

So compared to integration-as-proximity research, social exchange theory engages social process at the level of individual actors in situated engagements with particular others. It is directly meaningful to social actors who are actively pursuing group membership or group members who are open to the incorporation of new group members. It is interactive in the sense that the concerns and stances of both outsider and insider are taken into consideration. In his seminal paper, for example, Peter Blau (1960) argues that social integration depends on (1) the motivation to join a group; (2) the skills necessary to show that one is both attractive and approachable; and (3) group members who find that the newcomer is attractive but does not threaten their status position in the group.

As with the integration-as-proximity theory, I see two important ways in which exchange theory reduces the complexity of integration as lived by actors in the world. While the theory is social psychological in nature, it draws on a model of human behavior which has direct ties to structural functionalism and a voluntaristic theory of action. Both the outsider and the member act according to motivations, attitudes, and reasons which precede any particular situation and determine their behavior toward or within the group. Human interaction is reduced to the rational exchange of commodities like “respect” and “deference” which facilitate cohesive “bonds” among the group. Blau argues:

“A person with superior qualities which enable him to provide services that are in demand receives the respect and deference of others in a group, which bestows superordinate status upon him, in exchange for rendering these services.”

From this perspective, a person who appears to have relatively little to offer in terms of skills or services will be less likely to successfully integrate themselves into the group, unable to motivate

others to pay sufficient heed to his or her presence. But the theory remains probabilistic. Looking at a few key variables, it shows how integration is associated with measures of respectability, popularity, and length of time with the group.

But nearly nothing can be said about individuals who defy the model. The rub comes in the actual organization of action through which actors induce the acceptance of others, regardless of background features of their lives. The explanation must be in the active coordination and mutual orientation of actors who were previously unknown and disinterested in one another. It occurs through interaction that is more subtle than rational zero-sum exchange. Looking closely at the raw materials of naturally occurring social life we see that the exchange model of integration applies only to a world constructed by researchers. It works with a static snapshot of mechanically motivated automatons rather than the flesh and blood human beings of actual life.²

A second but related critique relates to the starting assumption that a “group” exists as a coherent structure of equally “in” members. Outsiders are presumed motivated by the desire to find their way inside. But the metaphor of a “group structure” should not be taken too literally. Robert Garot (2010), for instance, shows the wide variety of relationships that inner-city youth have to the “gang”. Though popular culture would have it that young men are either “in” or “out”, to presuppose the coherence of the gang as a real group sanitizes the diverse ways that kids live the reality of gang life in the neighborhood. Any sense of “groupness” ought to be seen as an ongoing practical achievement and thus the motivation to “join” may not pre-exist the social processes involved in mixing up with unknown others. The processes of mixing and gaining the sense of “we-ness” that characterizes group life should be within the purview of analysis rather than pre-supposed by it.

² This is a familiar critique of functionalist influenced sociology made by those who study interaction in naturally occurring social life (Blumer 1979; Douglas 1970; Garfinkel 1967).

Who's Got Next? Toward a Naturalistic Account of Integration in Public

In this dissertation I treat “pickup” park use as a case of meaningful social integration. Research on public parks has not sufficiently explored the potential or contingencies of naturally occurring social integration. Many scholars begin inquiry into parks with the value laden assumptions that parks are important resources for any community. They explicitly or implicitly lean on a range of studies which suggest that close access to public open space is associated with all kinds of positive social and health related outcomes (Babey, Brown, and Hastert 2005; Bedimo-Rung, Mowen, and Cohen 2005; Burdette and Whitaker 2004; Cohen et al. 2006; Kipke et al. 2007; Nicholls 2001; Scott and Jackson 1996). And beyond their apparent health effects, parks are charming because different cultural sensibilities and ethnic groups draw on and use them in different ways (Loukaitou-Sideris 1995; Low, Taplin, and Scheld 2005).

But while parks are celebrated for their potential the celebrations stop there. The empirical picture provided by much park scholarship presents parks as overwhelmingly failing to live up to their potential. Politically minded sociologists regularly find that parks reflect deeply pervasive sources of inequality and injustice. Political economists point to wealthy urban elites as having a vested interest in the privatization of public spaces and intensification of land use. “Growth entrepreneurs” in different cities and different neighborhoods compete against one another for resources to further develop and intensify the land which will make them the greatest profit (Molotch and Logan 1987; Molotch 1976). Inevitably then, contemporary users of the land get the short end of the stick because it is not their interest that drives the development or design of the urban space. The result for post-modern cynics is a pattern of constant privatization and militarization of public spaces (Davis 1992; Fishman 1996; Hayden 2006; Low

1997). Further, studies of snap shot distributions of public parks regularly show that wealthy neighborhoods have the most public spaces revealing institutional bias in the way that funding for open space is distributed (Oh and Jeong 2007; Wolch, Wilson, and Fehrenbach 2005).

None of these studies are oriented toward understanding the different processes and the sociological contingencies through which parks become spaces of meaningful integration. Failing to situate patterns of park use within the unfolding lives of park users, they cannot account for the ongoing existence of an informal but vibrant “pickup” scene like that which exists at the OVP basketball court. Indeed, pickup basketball is a familiar and charming scene in many urban parks. Its “pickup” quality presents a challenge to explanation precisely because it pulls people from disparate walks of life, emerges spontaneously without formal oversight, and propels itself through motivation that is constructed in the foreground of action and interaction at the park itself. To understand the contingencies of such a scene we must carve out an analytic space situated in other forms of park use.

Pickup basketball represents a middle ground between two alternative ways that public spaces become meaningful in the lives of park users. First, even when used by diverse segments of the population public parks are often colonized by groups whose organization extends beyond the bounds of the space itself. Families, church groups, adolescent gangs, exercise classes, and ethnically defined community organizations may arrive or congregate together in public and organize themselves in ways that mark themselves off from non-members. Families put down blankets or otherwise capture sections of a public space announcing a coherent “we-ness” to non-members. Organizations put out schedules, advertise, and create t-shirts or other paraphernalia that provide physical evidence of the group’s existence and provide the structure, logic, and motivation for individuals venture into the public realm.

On the other hand, small groups of individuals often go into public expecting to encounter the massive and chaotic diversity of the world out there. They go to places like shopping malls, city squares, playgrounds, museums, and parks anticipating that they may see just about anybody, but nobody in particular. They practice people watching, an activity that Elijah Anderson has called “folk ethnography” (Anderson 2004). Reveling in the public sphere, they observe others and occasionally even come up with coherent narratives about the lives of strangers who are very different from themselves. They may occasionally recognize a person, especially a vendor or worker who spends significant time in the space. But by-and-large they are taken in and swallowed up by the sea of strangers. Like drivers passing on the road, their experience of the space is shaped by their mutual co-presence but it is not clear that their fleeting proximity has any lasting impact.

The OVP basketball is more uncertain, sporadic, and improvisational than people entering public space as members of an already established organization. But it is more stable, patterned, coherent, and “private” than the folk ethnographers who pass by and observe one another from a distance. And so the way that integration is lived by the men who frequent the OVP basketball court is not captured either by mere proximity to unknown and diverse others nor by the desire to be integrated “into” a coherent group structure.

From diverse and disparate biographical trajectories men arrive at the park and mix up with one another. They expect some set of known strangers to come to the park to participate in games as well. For brief periods of time on particular mornings they anticipate seeing one another, mixing up, and going their separate ways until they cross paths at the park once again. On each occasion of play, they disattend from the details of their off-court lives in order to encounter one another inside the gaming context. Over and over again, they actively do the work

of integrating. And so the park serves as a regular site of overlap between park users who would otherwise have little or no contact. Continually finding the scene as they suspect it, they continually return to find the scene again. The scene perpetuates itself through the momentum created by the collective belief that it exists apart from their individual involvement.

This form of park use hangs in a fragile balance. That it persists without the markers of formal organization or institutional awareness is part of the place's charm. If the belief that the scene is dissipating begins to spread, it will begin to fade as a consequence. The meaning that players find in the game is both cause and consequence of its ongoing existence. In this dissertation I provide a naturalistic account of the quality and quantity of social integration at the park. I treat integration as the processes which pull otherwise separated biographical trajectories into mutual engagement and coordination. And I study how the barriers to segregation are overcome at OVP by drawing on diverse types of empirical data which speak to the contingencies of public place integration.

The title of this dissertation, "Who's got next?" is symbolic of the entire process. When a player approaches the court, whether for the first time or as a seasoned regular, they ask other prospective players on the sideline "Who's got next?" as a first step toward integrating themselves into the queue of forthcoming games. They organize their own line of action in order to gain access to the games. The question represents the first step toward stabilizing the chaos and randomness of the public sphere by fitting oneself into an emergent collective organization. For newcomers this first step into the scene is also the first step toward becoming known at the court and contributing to the balance of public place integration.

Chapter Outline

In the following empirical chapters I treat the social integration endemic to pickup park use as the phenomenon to be explained. Each chapter addresses different sociological contingencies which have facilitated this form of park use at Ocean View Park, pulling men from their individual private spheres and generating stable situated encounters with unknown others. In each empirical theme the fragile basketball scene is at risk as the boundaries of segregated social worlds may have been and may one day still be ossified. But to this point in history the scene has been held in balance and the outcome is a particular quality and form of social integration.

In Chapter two I consider the social production of an intimate park environment as critical to the basketball scene which has emerged at OVP. If a park is overwhelmed by a sea of visitors, stability and predictability are much more difficult to foster. And so it is critical that in its formation, the park was relatively cut off from the sea of public life in the surrounding neighborhood. In this first empirical chapter I turn to the historical emergence of Ocean View Park within its local ecology and compare it to the emergence of another nearby park, the Venice Beach Recreation Center (VBRC). VBRC is situated in an adjacent Los Angeles neighborhood and sits next to an iconic beach boardwalk, facilitating a basketball scene with a very different character. I analyze contingencies of both parks' historical origins in order to account for their relatively iconic and intimate characters.

In Chapter three I turn from the contingencies in the historical and ecological background of park formation to the foreground of players' lives and the diverse logics of participation in the games at OVP. Through the themes in this chapter, I explore just what kind of integrative experience the basketball games at the park provide. Given that most of the players live in multi-

ethnic and multi-cultural social worlds away from the park, the park does not provide novel mixing of otherwise segregated communities. Rather, the park basketball scene is held in common by men with diverse practical interests in the scene who would otherwise not come into contact. Under a qualitatively unique kind of “cosmopolitan canopy” (Anderson 2004, 2011), these men arrive with the intent of coming into focused contact with friends, familiars, and total strangers alike. Never becoming a uniform group of insiders they keep their differences alive, doing and re-doing integration on each occasion of play.

In the final two chapters I analyze the pragmatic work through which players construct a gaming environment which evokes and reveals distinctive versions of self. To do so I move from the diverse biographical circumstances of the players to the ways in which they leave their differences behind and focus together on a vivid present defined solely by the game’s universe of significance. In chapter four I analyze players’ unfolding phases of attachment to that scene over the course of a day of pickup basketball. The game is contingent on the players’ work to synchronize their trips to the park. They can’t simply show up whenever it suits them, but neither is there a formal authority running the show. Then they must collectively reorganize themselves in order to enter the gaming universe together. I show the journey from the world of everyday life into the world of the game and how collectively producing and populating the game itself is full of emotional peaks and valleys. The rendition of self that is facilitated by the journey justifies continued participation in future days of basketball.

In Chapter five I analyze a final contingency that must be overcome for the scene to sustain itself. Players must cope with the ever present possibility that what they are doing is “merely” play, a waste of time that doesn’t deserve to be taken seriously. What would it say about them if they invested so much of themselves in something so frivolous? And so I analyze

the work of sustaining a version of play that is sufficiently understood as a “real game”. I argue that this work is primarily accomplished in the players’ orientation toward rule violations, disagreements, and disputes. Without the help of referees players monitor the unfolding action for possible infractions, announce violations, and form up and resolve their disagreements. They avoid a game that is too legalistic and rule-bound but also seek a serious attachment to the rules lest the “basketballness” of the activity be threatened all together. When successful, the disputing practices generate the motivation to take the game seriously and find real, self-inflating (or deflating) significance in the games.

This is a study of the conditions of creating a park as a particular kind of public place. This version of the public is not defined merely by government ownership or universal access, but by meaningfully integrative interactions between unknown, unfamiliar, and diverse others. It is meaningful to a wide variety of people exactly for its ability to sustain integrative encounters. In the conclusion I draw implications for urban research by showing what is unique about the kind of public that is created and sustained through pickup basketball at the park. With assistance from the park’s physical ecological features, the players build and sustain a gaming cosmos which provides honest and vivid reflections of self. The public is deeply into them and their own sense of self in society. This makes for a discussion of “fun” as both outcome and engine to the scene’s ongoing existence

Chapter 2

A Tale of Two Courts: Creating Intimacy and Iconicity in Public

I asked Luke whether he actually knew what the park was called. He told me, “Well technically it’s Oceanside. But I didn’t know it was Oceanside until recently. I just call it that park between the two towers. And people are like, ‘There’s a park there?’ And that’s kind of the beauty of it. It’s hidden. But it’s not hidden. Nobody thinks people play there. So that keeps the insanity of the Venice courts from permeating into our area.

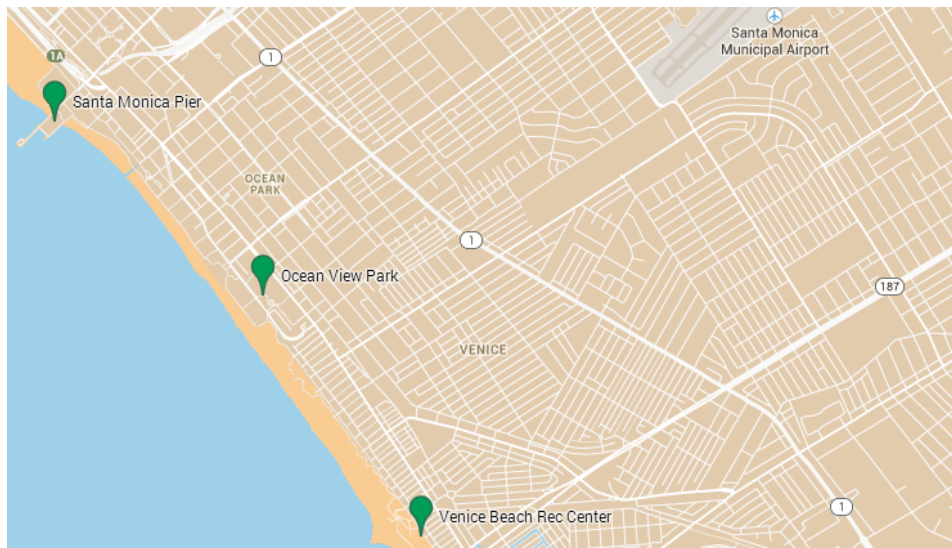
Luke is a 42 year old white man. After struggling to finish college in his home state of Arizona he became intrigued by the film industry and moved to Los Angeles on a whim to try to find his way in. With the help of a high school friend who was already in the city he found a cheap apartment in Venice and a job waiting tables at a restaurant on the iconic Santa Monica Pier. The pier attracts millions of visitors from near and far every year and the restaurant has become extremely successful. Luke has been able to sustain himself by waiting tables while gradually finding his way as an independent film producer.

As a life-long soccer player Luke began playing in various recreational soccer leagues around the city but soon found that his location by the beach would more easily facilitate him learning to play basketball. Living in Venice, the iconic basketball courts of the Venice Beach Recreation Center (VBRC) first captured his attention. The courts have been featured in many movies, commercials, and video games. They are situated next to the iconic Venice boardwalk which, next to Disneyland, attracts the most tourists of any location in the Los Angeles Area. And so the basketball courts are on full display for an incredibly diverse array of passersby who arrive to participate in some of the best and most bizarre people watching in Los Angeles. The park also features handball courts, paddle tennis courts, gymnastics equipment, an open air weight lifting facility, a skate park, and a steady stream of street performers. On a busy day the effect is additive as each facility pulls in crowds of users and spectators.

While Luke first played in small 3 on 3 games at Venice one of his managers at work invited him out to play at Ocean View Park. Until that time, he hadn't even known that the park existed. But once he played there he was hooked. In part, the park sat directly between his apartment in Venice and his restaurant in Santa Monica. He would stop at the park in the afternoon, play for several hours, and then continue north toward the pier. But the scene at OVP was more stable, more intimate, and gradually Luke came to feel that he had a place there. The fact that he mis-identified the name of the park (he called it "Oceanside") serves as further evidence of the park's understated and hidden character. Though he was just learning the game his height and athleticism gave him an identity as a shot blocker at Ocean View Park. Sending opponent's shot attempts careening out of bounds quickly became Luke's favorite play.

Luke's experience of the respective basketball scenes at Venice and OVP is typical of regular OVP players. While the Venice courts are more constantly busy, many players sense that the play is corrupted by the crowds of onlookers. They often tell stories of players in Venice more interested in showboating for the crowds than playing the game the "right way." Tomás, an OVP regular once told me when he does play at Venice (a rare occasion at this point) he is extremely selective about who he plays with. He tries to limit the chaos of the courts by arriving with and participating only with known others.

Figure 4 – Map of the coastline depicting the respective locations of VBRC, OVP, and the Santa Monica Pier



Recently a small business venture has sought to capitalize on the grandiosity of the Venice basketball courts. On crowded summer days at the beach the Venice Basketball League (VBL) announces its presence with kiosks selling merchandise, a play-by-play announcer with a microphone, half-time musical performances, and impressively athletic performers. Beachgoers crowd around the courts, sitting on bleachers to take in the action. The teams mainly consist of ex-college players, some of whom are still seeking a living playing professionally at home and abroad. Many of the teams feature exclusively black men but attract crowds every bit as diverse as the boardwalk itself. When these games are running, the pickup scene dies down as many potential players opt to watch the high flying action rather than play in games of their own.

Many OVP regulars come to the VBL games as spectators rather than participants. They take in the action and root for Cole, one of the few court regulars who is talented enough to play for a VBL team. Tony, on the other hand, comes to the VBL games not as a basketball performer but as a musician. His band performs hip hop, reggae, and RnB music during halftime and also provides lyric-less beats as a backdrop to the games themselves. The VBL both draws

on and contributes to the iconicity of the basketball park in Venice. Tourists come to Venice hoping and expecting to have something exciting to see. The pickup games are typically part of the show and the VBL serves to formalize that show with set rosters, uniforms, half-time performances, and a schedule.

While located only a mile apart from one another along the same beach boardwalk in adjacent neighborhoods that share substantially similar histories, any visitor can sense that the OVP and VBRC have vastly different social characters. If basketball at OVP is like a tide pool that dries up after each use, Venice beach is a sea of constant activity. The courts at the VBRC therefore resist the privatization and sense of enclosure that exists at OVP. The iconicity of the former stands in direct contrast to the intimacy of the latter. Working within a growing ethnographic tradition that takes a longer temporal view of contemporary urban spaces (Katz 2010), in this chapter I account for these different contemporary park characters through an analysis of the formative processes of each park within their local neighborhood ecologies.

Local Ecology and Park Careers

Publicly owned recreation space is purchased, developed, organized, and ultimately used in an ecological context. Over 50 years ago Jane Jacobs convincingly argued that when parks are created they are more likely to reflect the social character of their surroundings than instantly transform them (Jacobs 1961:89–111). Whether a park sits next to a housing complex, a suburban neighborhood, a row of bars, or a freeway onramp is likely to influence the patterns of use it ultimately sustains. Any existing park stands as the contemporary evidence of formation processes which placed just this park in just this ecological context and therefore shaped the kind of place it has become.

In this chapter I examine the historical processes which were critical to the creation of both Ocean View Park and the Venice Beach Recreation Center in order to show how these two parks were created within their respective neighborhoods. In doing so I seek to explain how neighborhoods with substantially similar characters as recently as the 1950s came to house such radically different kinds of parks. The histories of these two parks were deeply intertwined with changes to their respective neighborhoods and so their stories inevitably implicate broader urban histories.

Understanding what Setha Low (Low 2000:127) has called the “social production” of public parks is a way of understanding the processes which set the stage for particular patterns and form of use which were not fully anticipated in advance. In the analysis that follows, I account for the respectively intimate and iconic characters of the two contemporary parks by recounting two very different types of “park careers.”³ I use the terms “positive” and “negative” to distinguish the two park careers along pragmatic rather than moral lines. In the former situation parks are created as an amenity to enrich or enhance the area. Specific design features or amenities are provided in an attempt to facilitate and encourage future styles of use. “Negative” park careers, on the other hand, characterize formative processes through which a park is sought in an explicit attempt to negate alternative forms of land use that are seen as problematic for the neighborhood. Leaning on the implicit belief in parks as public goods, interested parties can often develop a consensus around creating a park in place of more divisive alternatives. While the histories of OVP and VBRC certainly combine features of both processes, I’ll argue that OVP was largely created for its ability to facilitate consensus by

³ Tying to a history of sociological studies which study individuals’ passage through different organizational positions, phases of life, or subjective outlooks, I study the process of park formation as its formative “career” (Hughes 1997). I argue that we must see parks as the product of a sequence of decisions and confluence of factors playing out over time to create just these parks in just these locations.

negating alternatives while VBRC was, from the beginning, understood as providing an important amenity in its own right.

Public Purchase: Venice Beach Recreation Center is Born

In the early part of the 20th century the communities that are now Venice and Ocean Park were laid out by substantially similar developers and development interests. North of these communities Senator John P. Jones had famously purchased and settled the city of Santa Monica with hopes of creating an industrial port that would be connected by rail to his silver mines in Nevada. South of his holdings, however, the Ocean Park Company developed what eventually became the southern part of Santa Monica as an amusement and recreation center. The community was easily accessible to Los Angeles elites who could take day trips to the beach from inland neighborhoods. Around the turn of the century Abbot Kinney, one of Ocean Park Company's owners, broke off and developed his "Venice of America" on unsettled swamp land south of Ocean Park. Though Venice and Ocean Park were briefly part of the same municipality, in the 1920s the two communities went separate ways. Venice chose to consolidate with Los Angeles and Ocean Park consolidated with Santa Monica. At that point the two neighborhoods shared much in social character, urban form, and economic interests despite being situated on opposite sides of a municipal border.

During the great depression and continuing through the Second World War, federal financing was increasingly available to municipalities and private developers interested in expanding or improving the stock of modern, middle-class housing. The National Housing Act of 1934 created the Federal Housing Administration and the 1949 Federal Housing Act provided new resources for planners to transform existing communities through redevelopment and slum clearance programs. Santa Monica and Los Angeles drew on these sources of funding

differently in their treatment of Venice and Ocean Park. In doing so, they created beachfront parks through very different social processes resulting in very different contemporary characters.

While the city of Los Angeles didn't waste any time engaging the redevelopment program in the 1949 Housing Act, the city's power structure was primarily concerned with the closer-in city. In October 1950 the Los Angeles city council voted to sign a contract with the Federal Housing Authority for a massive slum clearance, redevelopment, and public housing project in Chavez Ravine. Chavez Ravine was at that time a small, quaint, "Mexican village" in the hills just north of Downtown. Despite protests from locals who enjoyed their quiet, rural lifestyle, the housing stock did not meet modern health codes and the LA City Council pursued plans for tripling the density of the area with 24 thirteen-story towers and 163 two-story structures.⁴ Over the next ten years the project came under heavy criticism from progressive community advocates as well as conservatives fearing "creeping socialism". Ultimately, Brooklyn Dodger owner Walter O'Malley helped the city recover some of its debt obligations in 1959 by building a new baseball stadium and moving the team to Los Angeles. In that case, the for-profit "park" was justified as a way of negating the prospects of a residential community that was understood as uniquely threatening to American values.

On an infrastructural level the Venice Beach community may well have been equally ripe for slum clearance and urban redevelopment. A 1947 report on Venice from the Department of City Planning noted:

The housing is not only sub-standard... but the land is badly used because of the narrow lots, poor street layout, and its under-use in relation to its potentiality for beach rental property. Parts of the Venice area and the adjacent city of Santa Monica [particularly, Ocean Park], similarly jammed with shanties, are actually the most valuable tracts in the county. (quoted in Deener 2012:40)

⁴ For more complete histories of this project see Hines (1982), Cuff (2002), and Parson (2005).

Despite this recognition of the economic potential of the beach and language that implicates the designation of a “slum”, the city of LA (perhaps learning from the heated political battles in the closer-in city) did not push nearly as hard for slum clearance and urban redevelopment by the beach. Community groups in Venice disputed vigorously over whether the issue of redevelopment should even be discussed, considered, and studied. The Venice Civic Union resisted a federally funded survey of the community, fearing that this first step would open the door to the city forcing redevelopment upon the community despite their insistence that there would be no such obligation.⁵

In part the community’s fight against redevelopment was assisted by the fact that the new head of the city’s Department of Recreation and Parks, George Hjelte, was focused on transforming the “honky tonk” character of the Venice beachfront which had become home to various vice industries. In 1947 Los Angeles voters approved the first of two major park bond bills in recognition of the city’s lack of park space. Hjelte quickly had his eye on the Venice pier which was home to gambling and dance halls. He refused the Abbot Kinney Company’s bid to renew their lease and instead pursued a more wholesome brand of recreation by the beach. In 1950 he spoke to the department about his vision for an “athletic beach” in Venice:

“It will have sand, primarily upon which will be places designed for volleyball, handball, and paddle tennis, which will be paved, by the way, basketball being accommodated on the pavement, also shuffleboard on the pavement; other area being on sand where there might be informal wrestling but not in the manner of the television shows- just a place for work-out of people who like to work out on the beach and benches where people might observe them. In front of the benches will be a platform where gymnasts might come for training and exhibition of their high skills. Many of the athletes who go to the beach appreciate an audience and it is great stimulation toward their training.”

So early on the plans for the Venice beachfront included a desire to generate a performer-audience dynamic. Hjelte was all for sustaining the popularity and public character of the area

⁵ “Venice Urban Renewal Program Hit, Defended” *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 1958.

and found recreation funds available as a way of transforming the existing character of the beachfront and creating a more universally accessible and wholesome space.

Hjelte's vision for an athletic beach became a source of pride for many local residents. With a growing sense that the beach community might be able to turn itself around in the 1960s the city of Los Angeles opted for a rigid code enforcement program rather than slum clearance in Venice. City bureaucrats swept through Venice and demanded that owners of older buildings- both residences and businesses - bring their buildings up to code. By the end of 1965, 550 buildings had been demolished, including some of the coffee shops and book stores that were critical to the counter-culture movements in the area (Deener 2012:40; Stanton 1993:158). During this period, at least some property owners were able to get loans from the FHA as part of urban renewal efforts. The result was a brand of urban renewal that transformed many individual properties but left the physical organization of the neighborhood intact.

The second park bond issue was passed in 1957 and provided 39.5 million dollars for the department of Playground and Parks. Hjelte still had his eye on Venice and one of the city's next major projects was a brand new concert pavilion at the foot of Windward Avenue, in the heart of Abbot Kinney's old Venice of America. The pavilion cost nearly a million dollars and further solidified the Venice beachfront as a place for public recreation and entertainment. Then in 1962 just as the city was engaged in code enforcement in the surrounding residential areas, they invested 30 thousand dollars on a new recreation facility at 1800 Ocean Walk, immediately south of the pavilion. The land was already publicly owned open space but the park amenities would create a greater attraction for people seeking specific recreational opportunities.

The recreation facility was completed by January of 1963 and included a basketball court, paddle tennis courts, volleyball courts, an outdoor gymnasium, a children's play area, new

landscaping, and concrete blocks to protect the facilities from sand blown in from the beach.⁶ From that point forward the Venice Beach recreation facilities have been the biggest recreation center with the most diverse facilities on the beach in LA County. In 1964, the LA Times ran a short article and a photo series calling Venice Beach a “Supermarket of recreation” because it provided facilities for all types of people.⁷ The attention that the park received was an early indication of the growing national and international interest with the Venice Boardwalk as a tourist destination and a cultural landmark by the beach. Throughout the 1960s local residents used Hjelte’s athletic beach facilities as a justification for resisting various proposals from private corporations to purchase the beachfront and create a for-profit amusement center.

So in the 1950s and 1960s the Venice Beach Recreation Center was established by a confluence of factors which sought to create a publicly accessible amenity without transforming the surrounding urban form. Partly because of community protest and partly because of their preoccupation with slum areas closer to downtown, Los Angeles did not engage a major redevelopment program in Venice that would have permanently altered the urban form. The narrow streets and small plots which had been established earlier in the century remained. Without a sharp increase in the housing stock and an increasingly popular beachfront, property values would rise in the coming decades. Wealthier residents moved into the area and transformed dilapidating beach cottages into expensive condos and homes. But within a few blocks from the beach the basic urban form laid out by Abbott Kinney remained. Meanwhile, the city sought to upgrade the community through public investment in recreational amenities on the beach. Once that investment was made, the Venice beachfront was set to grow up into a popular tourist destination.

⁶ “Park Improvements Completed by City” *Los Angeles Times*, January 24th, 1963.

⁷ “Venice—Something for Everyone” *Los Angeles Times*, August 23rd, 1964.

A Theme Park is Born and A Theme Park Dies: divergent processes of Iconization

Despite critiques that Los Angeles has become an agglomeration of theme parks, “disneyworlds”, and placeless fantasy landscapes (Sorkin 1992), not all attempts to develop themed locales have been equally effective. Certainly Abbot Kinney attempted to create an iconic urban milieu with his Venice of America development, but Venice had a significant downturn during the mid-20th century. At that point, Kinney’s attempt would have been understood as a clear failure. The neighborhood was populated by counter culture art institutions, beatnik coffee houses, homeless encampments, and oil derricks, none of which fulfilled Kinney’s vision for a high culture beach resort.

And yet gradually the character of the Venice beachfront transformed over the latter half of the 20th century into a popular destination. People flocked to Venice Beach not searching for a version of Venice Italy, but searching for LA’s own beachfront transgressive culture. Andrew Deener depicts the transformation of the Venice Beach boardwalk from a stretch of sidewalk as a home territory for bohemians of the 1950s and 1960s to the “Bohemian Theme Park” that exists today (Deener 2012:164–203). He shows how:

“The combination of a vocal and visible counterculture, long-standing property neglect, and abandonment along a major public resource- a wide open beach- made it possible for the emergence of a series of popular fads and mass cultural events that brought in droves of visitors.” (Deener 2012:171)

Perhaps chief among these fads was a roller skating craze that prompted Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley to declare Venice the “roller-skating capital of the world.” As crowds came to the Venice beachfront a microeconomy emerged in which local bohemians could make a profit by selling art, t-shirts, and knick knacks. Others found the crowds a suitable audience for whom they could display their musical and carnival talents. The boardwalk scene became widely known for its funky character and compelling people watching.

The recreational facilities at Venice today have to be understood in the context of that transformation. As the beachfront attracted national and international attention as a tourist destination, Los Angeles has continually upgraded the recreation facilities. In 1972, a new bike path was installed which facilitated growing interest in both roller skating and skateboarding by the beach. The paddle tennis courts were upgraded in the same year. In 1987 local weightlifters brought recognition to the outdoor weightlifting facility in Venice by re-naming it “Muscle Beach”- a reference to a popular tourist attraction that had originated in Santa Monica earlier in the century.

Two years later the whole recreation facility went through a major transformation when 1.5 million dollars were spent on upgrading the facilities. The money came from the Quimby Act which requires developers to contribute to a fund to improve public parks if they build within a one mile radius. Part of this money was used to rip up the existing basketball court and add three new courts.⁸ The recreation director at the time, Darlene Galindo, told the LA Times that the basketball court was already extremely popular and that once the new courts were put in “you’re gonna see more people than grains of sand” at the park.

Galindo was right. The park today buzzes with constant activity. But the reason is not simply that these great facilities exist. The facilities were themselves a response to the social character of the area. Planners sensed that the growing excitement for the boardwalk as a tourist destination meant that more extensive facilities were justified. And so the recreation center has become both cause and effect of the iconic character of Venice. The weight lifters and gymnasts at Venice beach perform unbelievable feats with their muscles glistening for crowds of onlookers. The basketball players play to the crowd. The homeless camp out on the landscaped grass and panhandle for marijuana. It’s all part of the show.

⁸ “Athletic Center Renovation Nears End” *Los Angeles Times*, March 2nd, 1989

While the iconic recreation space in Venice bloomed naturally over the second half the 20th century, north of the Venice-Ocean Park border the city of Santa Monica took a much more dramatic and direct approach to transforming its beachfront. In 1956 CBS and the Los Angeles Turf Club were granted a lease on the old Ocean Park Pier to create Pacific Ocean Park (POP), a 28 acre nautical themed amusement park that was meant to rival Disneyland as the pre-eminent amusement center in Southern California. The park included over 40 carnival-style rides, several lunch counters, and band stands.

The pier itself had been constructed in the late 1800s by Kinney and Ryan and had gone through numerous ownership changes since. It had short lived heydays earlier in the century as Fraser's "Million Dollar Pier", Pickering Pleasure Pier, and Lick Pier which eventually hosted the Aragon Ballroom where the Lawrence Welk Show was taped. Each pier had significant trouble with fires and Santa Monica hoped that the influx of capital from the entertainment industry would create a popular tourist destination that would help enhance the Ocean Park neighborhood as a whole. Indeed, the surrounding "slum" was a primary impediment to the park's success. Ernie Powell, a neighborhood activist in the 1970s recalled coming to POP as a child:

"One of my main questions that I cared about as a Kid- as a 9, 10, 11, 12 year old- was "is Disneyland better than Pacific Ocean Park?" ...My mother took me to POP. My understanding was that there was a big octopus and all that. And I remember driving through whatever the community was that got us to POP and I remember being afraid. My parents were reasonably culturally progressive and I typically wasn't scared of poor neighborhoods. But I remember driving through there and thinking "man this is really scary.""

By the mid-1960s the park was failing. The owners blamed the city of Santa Monica for not doing enough to provide safe and convenient access to the amusement park. But the park was clearly full of its own troubles from the start. Ride malfunctions due to shoddy construction

were common and they didn't have the capital to stay open full-time during the off season.⁹ When POP permanently closed its doors in 1967, the dilapidating structures became an eye sore for the community. Fires struck the pier and nautical themed rubbish littered the sand. Ironically, out of the ashes of POP emerged a counter culture skateboarding crew called "Dogtown". Young men risked injury by surfing in and around the old POP pier and soon took their skills to the streets in Ocean Park and Venice on skateboards. As renegade youths transforming the beach side communities into a series of skate obstacles, they contributed to the image of Ocean Park as a slum by the sea (Peralta and Stecyk 2001).

While the iconic imagery of the Venice beachfront emerged gradually over the course of several decades, the city of Santa Monica took a much more top down approach that flamed out quickly. The hope that a massive commercial amusement park would uplift the community of Ocean Park backfired and left nearby residents feeling unsettled with the city's approach to the community. In Venice, however, Hjelte's dream for an "athletic beach" was a source of pride that was defended against proposals for private commercial development. Today's Venice Recreation Center is thus not only a product of a public park bond and municipal spending on recreation facilities, it reflects a much wider collective act through which a countless number of social actors produced an iconic scene that attracts millions of people to the park every year. With the attempt to create an iconic amusement park failing in Ocean Park, the fate of the beachfront would be sealed by alternative land use negotiations in which park space became a by-product.

Negating a non-park in Ocean Park

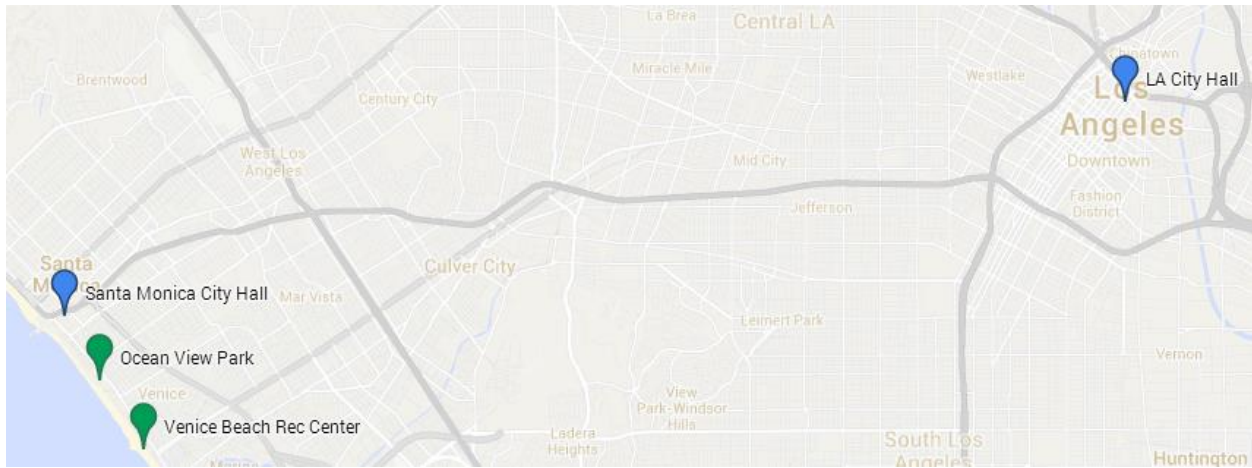
Thus far I have described how both the cities of Santa Monica and Los Angeles took active steps during the 1950s and 1960s to transform the character of the beachfronts in Ocean

⁹ "P.O.P. Goes POP! Amusement Park to Go on the Block" *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 1968

Park and Venice, respectively. While Venice Beach was becoming a vibrant publicly owned place, Santa Monica's privately developed amusement park was burning to the sand. This failed attempt at transforming the beachfront in Ocean Park was part of the context in which OVP's formation career was born.

POP was, in fact, part of a broader plan for coastal transformation in Santa Monica which included drawing on federal urban redevelopment programs. While Venice is situated 17 miles from its city council chambers in downtown Los Angeles, Ocean Park is just a long walk from downtown Santa Monica. So while LA was focused on urban redevelopment closer to the city center, Santa Monica leaders focused much more attention on Ocean Park as its primary slum district. In the 1950s local politicians saw Ocean Park in the context of the city's reputation as a quaint garden-city, gained from northern Santa Monica's pleasant tree-lined streets and outdoor cafes. Ocean Park's reputation was exacerbated by the fact that the palisades cliffs in the northern part of the city trail off as one travels south into Ocean Park. The neighborhood's more intimate relationship with the sea and sand suggested that it was "worth more" than it was earning in property tax revenue. City leaders figured that if the housing stock was radically improved, Ocean Park might be well worth the investment.

Figure 5 – Map of LA Region showing relative distance between OVP, VBRC, and their respective city halls



And so while Los Angeles pursued relatively modest code enforcement in Venice, Santa Monica took a much more active approach to transforming the neighborhood of Ocean Park. They sought federal loans through the 1949 housing act to pursue a slum clearance and redevelopment program that would radically change the organization of the neighborhood's beachfront. The city formed a municipal redevelopment agency during the 1950s and immediately rumors circulated that the entire neighborhood of Ocean Park would be wiped out in favor of expensive apartment towers. Though plans that vast might have never really been in the works, by 1960 the redevelopment agency was ready to go forward with eminent domain proceedings that would clear four square blocks in the southwest corner of Ocean Park, adjacent to POP. Though neighborhood activists were calling for a more modest approach to redevelopment through federal loans to residents, the city ultimately decided to acquire and clear 259 separate properties on approximately 25 acres of land, displacing over three hundred families, two hundred small businesses, and approximately 1500 residents (Kraemer 1963).¹⁰

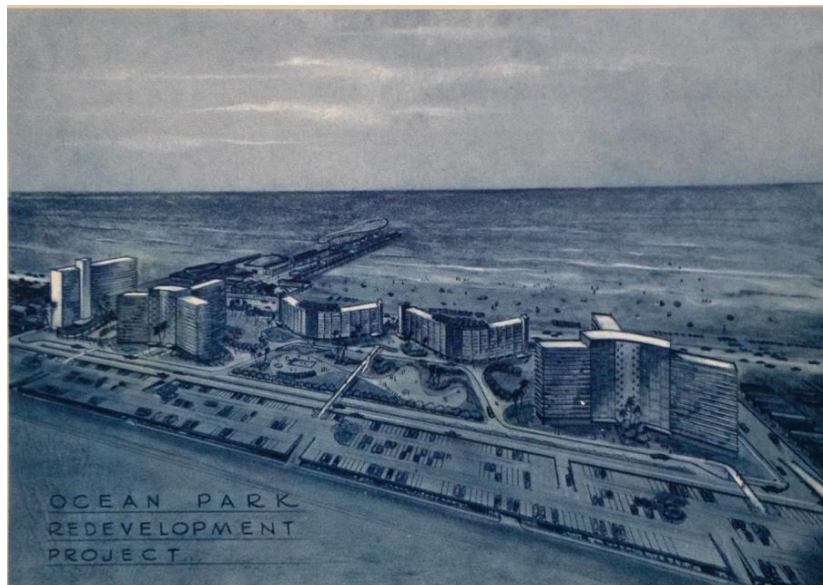
¹⁰ Different sources provide slightly different estimates for how many people were forced to move.

Despite protests from residents and neighbors, the political desire for redevelopment was too strong. Anti-growth advocates were seen as naïve for resisting the inevitable march toward the future. As was typical, the politics of redevelopment seemed to flip traditional notions of “conservative” and “liberal” on their heads. The apparently “conservative” city council advocated for a massive federally funded and bureaucratically organized project while “liberal” activists wanted to protect the rights of private property owners and preserve the traditional small town feel.

By 1964 the land was cleared, ready for building, and a plan and redeveloper had been selected. The redevelopment agency awarded the project to Kern County Land Company and Del E. Webb Corporation to build high rise luxury apartments interspersed with recreation facilities and landscaping. The proposed project was designed to be inward-facing, minimizing contact with the “disturbing” area around it (Kraemer 1963:64). The apartment towers and open spaces would be surrounded by a loop highway system which would give residents access to subterranean parking garages. While the majority of the land would be left open, the recreation facilities were explicitly designed for residents only. No public space, playgrounds, or parks were proposed.

The first phase of the project proceeded without issue. In 1967 the Santa Monica Shores, two 17-story high rise apartment towers, were completed on 5 acres along the eastern edge of the project and were made available to renters. Around this same time, the city built a small 9-hole golf course on the remainder of the project land. They hoped that the golf course would create a more appealing atmosphere that would attract new residents to the Shores. From its inception, however, the golf course was meant to be a temporary facility until Kern and Webb could continue building the next phases of the Santa Monica Shores development.

Figure 6 - Artist rendering of a plan for the Ocean Park Redevelopment Project. It shows several high rise residential facilities, private open space, a surrounding highway loop system, private parking, and POP in the background.



Despite this fast start the project skidded to a halt. While it was widely believed that the new wealthier residents and modern development inside the project would contribute to an economic revival in the surrounding neighborhood, the opposite seemed to happen. The Santa Monica Shores struggled to reach the 70% occupancy rate that would obligate the developer to begin working on the next phase. The experiment of having high rise apartment towers in a low-rise, low-income beach neighborhood appeared to be failing. Robert Hoffman, director of the project for the city believed that they needed to become “bigger than the blight”. He wanted to pursue the entirety of the redevelopment project at once rather than in piecemeal 5 acre installments.¹¹

When POP closed its doors and became an eye sore to the community its presence only exacerbated the problem of finding high income renters excited about moving to Ocean Park.

¹¹ “Renewal of Ocean Park Stalled After Fast Start” *Los Angeles Times*, October 22, 1967

Kern Land Company wanted to pursue a project with more office space and Santa Monica granted them a 6 month extension to propose something new. Unsatisfied with their negotiations with the city and the lack of early success in the project, Kern dropped out all together in 1969 and the city began negotiations with a series of new development companies who would be willing to bail them out of a tough, publicly embarrassing situation.

Crescent Bay Properties came to an agreement with the city in 1970 to develop the remaining 20 acres of the project if they could receive a tideland lease for a luxury hotel on the site of POP. Despite great optimism that this plan would create a new start for the lagging project, it was further delayed at the federal and state level. The federal department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) wanted the city to create separate contracts for the POP parcel and the redevelopment land. Then the State Lands Commission which oversees tidelands in California, demanded more information before making a ruling on the hotel development. In the meantime Lawrence Kates, the recent purchaser of the Santa Monica Shores threatened to sue the city over the Crescent Bay plan because the residential high rise towers would block his resident's views.¹² In 1971 Crescent Bay also backed out of the project.

The next developer in line was HFH Limited. They were selected for their interest in pursuing a project with lower-rise buildings which would hopefully satisfy Kates' concern over blocked views. HFH received a contract from the city in 1972 to create 1,430 apartment units on the remaining 20 parcels using a pyramid design that would graduate from 5 stories down to 1 story closer to the beach. By the beginning of 1973 there was again optimism that the project was on the verge of overcoming its rocky start.

Had the Kern Land Company, Crescent Bay, or HFH plans gone forward as planned, Ocean View Park could not exist today in the way that it does. Any open space in those

¹² "Suit Threatened Over Ocean Park Redevelopment Project" *Los Angeles Times*, October 21st, 1971

proposals was designed explicitly for new residents in order to maximize the value of the properties and to attract wealthier residents who might be concerned about the character of the surrounding neighborhood. So the ultimate creation of OVP was contingent on negating these more private forms of land use. While the Kern and Crescent proposals were negated by challenges in the land market itself, the HFH proposal was negated through broader legal and cultural changes both in Ocean View Park and the state of California.

In the early 1970s the neighborhood of Ocean Park was itself going through significant changes. While the redevelopment land was cleared, many other aging structures provided cheap rents close to the beach. And with the development of the new Santa Monica Freeway transportation to other parts of the region was increasingly convenient. Young veterans of the 1960s student rights movement began to see Ocean Park and Venice as ideal neighborhoods. Public transportation to UCLA was easy and the area was home to significant ethnic and economic diversity as well as a rich history of counter-cultural art movements. All these factors created a charm for young activists interested in pursuing causes of social and economic justice. To them, Ocean Park was decidedly unlike the northern side of Santa Monica where the majority of city council people lived.

Among the most active of the new residents were Ruth Galanter and David Shulman. Though they had only recently moved to Ocean Park, they represented a sensibility which Japonica Brown-Saracino has called “social preservationist”- new residents to a neighborhood who find and seek to protect the authenticity associated with the presence of “old timers” (Brown-Saracino 2004). They were deeply concerned that the new freeway and the redevelopment project were bringing permanent demographic changes to Ocean Park. Rents were starting to rise in the neighborhood and Main Street was quickly shedding its reputation as

the “Skid Row of the westside”. Galanter and Shulman recalled the day they first saw the New York Times on sale on Main Street. They knew change was underway and were prepared to take a stand to resist incoming condominiums, apartment towers, and the displacement of Ocean Park’s remaining low-income residents.

While political winds in the neighborhood were changing, it was a change at the state level which created the legal ammunition for activists to resist and ultimately defeat the HFH proposal. In November 1972 California voters passed proposition 20, a voter sponsor initiative which created the California Coastal Zone Conservation Commission (CCZCC) to oversee development within the coastal zone, defined as the area within 1,100 yards of the mean high tide line. While the initiative was expected to pass easily in coastal regions, voters all over the state overwhelmingly approved proposition 20. The campaign in favor of coastal oversight successfully defined the initiative as responsive to a statewide need to “save the coast” for everybody’s enjoyment. The CCZCC was charged with the task of developing a comprehensive plan for preserving the coast for the future which would need to be submitted to the California state legislature by December 1st, 1975. In the meantime the CCZCC was given regulatory authority. Any new development inside the coastal zone would need to apply for and receive a coastal permit before it could proceed.

When HFH and the city of Santa Monica were ready to begin building in January of 1973, they needed to receive an exemption from the newly passed proposition claiming they had a vested right in the project. Though the regional coastal commission accepted this claim, the State Commission in Sacramento could act as an appeals court when the case presented new or compelling issues for coastal regulation. The state commission ultimately decided that because

HFH did not have a formal building permit when Proposition 20 passed in November 1972, their development proposal ought to be subject to the permit process.

This exemption meeting was one of the first times that Galanter and Shulman discovered that the coastal commission provided a forum where they could actually win. The largely conservative city council had been unsympathetic to their arguments but the CCZCC was different. The Coastal Commission staff was generally young and idealistic. They saw themselves as engaged in a moral struggle against unfettered capitalism that would deprive Californians of a sacred resource. This sensibility created a welcome forum for Galanter and Shulman who became two of the most influential citizen speakers at Coastal Commission hearings. They teamed up with a Venice Legal Aid worker, Allan Emkin, and formed a dynamic trio, regularly attending and speaking at coastal commission hearings in the interest of slowing the trend toward high income developments in their neighborhood.

The critical issue for Ocean Park Redevelopment Project was a common one among big developers seeking coastal permits. It was a question of how the CCZCC came to interpret the Coastal Act's language about "public access". If the coast was understood as belonging to the people of California, what would count as sufficient access? Is a view from a hillside enough or would there need to be walking paths? How to deal with the claim of residents whose views would be blocked by a new development? How much parking and how cheap must it be to constitute sufficient access for those travelling from afar?

Paul Van Seters has argued that what made the Coastal Act unique among new forms of state land regulation in the 1970s was not written into the letter of the law itself, but in the expansive interpretation that the CCZCC gave to the concept of "public access" (van Seters 1989). It could not have been foreseen that "public access" would extend to low income housing

policies, but that is precisely the interpretation that was used by the coastal commission staff. If the coast is meant to belong to the people of California, then they reasoned that people of all income levels should have a reasonable opportunity to live in its vicinity. This became common sense for the CCZCC and the goal of protecting the “less affluent” in the coastal zone was officially endorsed when the state legislature voted on the Coastal Act of 1976 (van Seters 1989:166).

Ultimately the commission rejected the HFH proposal on the grounds that it blocked public access in a number of ways. The plan provided no affordable housing, it blocked physical access to the beach for those travelling by foot, and it included no public open space for coastal recreation. Their housing plan included majority 1 bedroom apartments, a fact that housing activists argued would bring wealthy singles to the neighborhood at the expense of low and moderate income families. Robert Getz, the owner of HFH properties asked whether it was his job as a businessman to subsidize social justice goals. For the first time Ocean Park activists and a regulatory body with permit authority answered this question in the same way. Don Neuwirth, a coastal commission staff member who reviewed the proposal felt that public financing justified a stronger stance on extracting concessions from developers. Ruth Galanter agreed:

“So I mentioned that the developers would always say, “you can’t make us subsidize these social objectives. I’m just a businessman.” Well, so this one comes along and this one IS subsidized. And so we say to the coastal commission, “This is public subsidy. This is where you should take a stand in favor of what it says in the beginning and the preamble of prop 20- the coast belongs to all the people.” And they did it. They turned down the permit.”

Proposition 20 intervened in the redevelopment project at a critical juncture. HFH properties was weeks away from receiving building permits for the next phase of high-rise apartments which would have permanently wrestled the land from public control. As of

September 1972, putting a public park on project land was not considered financially feasible. So while market failures had delayed earlier private developments on project land, a confluence of factors- changes to state land use law, demographic shifts in the neighborhood, and the effective organizing of new residents- combined to negate the HFH proposal. So by June of 1973 the California Coastal Commission was insisting on some kind of public open space in any future project proposal. While the Ocean View Park basketball court was hardly guaranteed by that decision, its potential was sustained.

Ocean View Park as bargaining chip

The first phase of Ocean View Park's career ended in the California Coastal Commission's demand that the project include public open space, thus negating a purely private form of land use. The next phase was not simply about negating an alternative use, but about negotiating the particulars of the design, size, and placement of that open space. In this process, the park itself was just one of numerous variables that were open for negotiation as the housing, access, and public space elements were resolved during the late 1970s and early 1980s. This negotiating process implicated a wide array of actors: neighborhood activists, city bureaucrats, a new redeveloper, project neighbors and land owners, coastal commission workers, and a number of lawyers. For many of these people, OVP itself was just one element in a much larger and extremely meaningful debate over the kind of city and neighborhood that they lived in.

In 1974 the Santa Monica city council was faced with an impending lawsuit from HFH. Further, its indebtedness to the federal government had surpassed 6 million dollars which created an annual interest of nearly half a million dollars. To help clean up this mess, the council hired a young and well respected municipal worker named John Jalili to work in community development as the Director of Environmental Services. Getting the Ocean Park Redevelopment

Project going again was one of his first priorities and he promptly prepared a request for a new redeveloper.

Eventually the city selected Joel Landau of Lincoln Properties. Landau's application was enhanced by the fact that he had already received the contract for a redevelopment project in Redondo Beach, a separate municipality about 11 miles south of Santa Monica. Landau had proven himself capable of working within municipal and coastal commission guidelines and quickly became respected among interested parties in Santa Monica as somebody who was much easier to work with than previous redevelopers. Landau took the attitude that in pursuing the project, he was essentially a customer of the city. As a redevelopment project, he knew he'd need to display patience and flexibility in determining the exact scope and location of the development he'd be allowed to pursue. Bob Myers, a legal aid worker in Venice recalled:

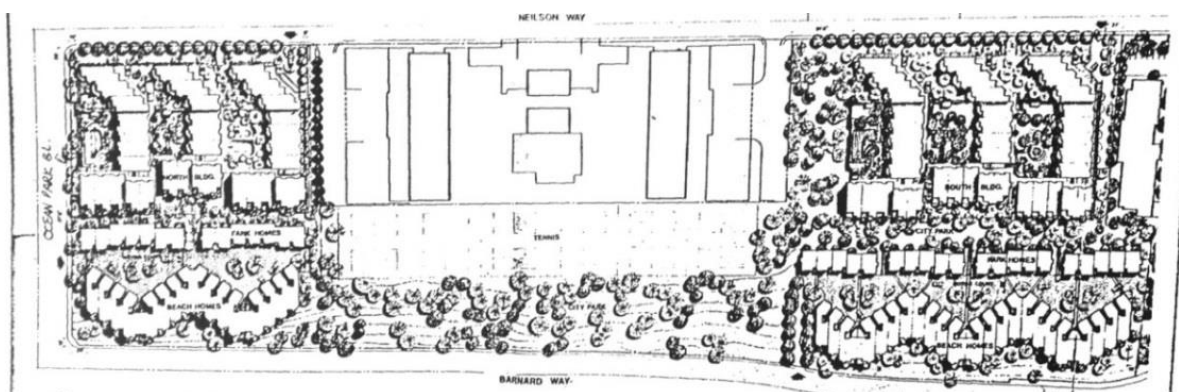
“Joel Landau was not a typical developer because he was very open to negotiating housing deals and stuff. One of his famous quotes to me was, and he said it jokingly, he'd become a communist if that was what it took to make money.”

On October 28, 1975 the Santa Monica Redevelopment Agency entered exclusive negotiations with Landau for the Lincoln Properties' proposal. In April of 1976 the city published an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) stating their plans for the project and arguing that it would not have permanent negative consequences for the coastal zone. Lincoln would build 200 condominiums north of the Shores Towers, 200 condominiums south of the Shores, and leave the area immediately in front of the towers as open space. Over the next 10 years, however, the precise quantity, quality, and location of that open space element would still come under intense scrutiny.

The first publicly released site plan came out in 1976 in the form of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR). In that plan, the open space element was to be occupied entirely by a

slightly reduced Santa Monica Shores golf course. The golf course felt like truly open, natural space and was beloved by many nearby retirees who found the course to be a respite from the homeless encampments along the Venice beachfront. The problem, however, was that the golf course might not pass muster as truly “public space” in the eyes of the coastal commission. The need to fence the golf course would block pedestrian access to the beach, one of the commission’s main priorities. Before seeking a coastal permit, the redevelopment agency approved revised plans which replaced the golf course with a public park.¹³ While the city would lose a bit of revenue from golfing fees, the park would serve some of the same population by including a complex of 12 public tennis courts.

Figure 7 - 1976 Coastal Commission Application includes 12 tennis courts in front of the Shores (middle), open green space (lower-middle), and low-rise condos to the north (left) and south (right)



In March of 1977 the state coastal commission approved the basic outline of the project which would include 397 condominium units, 851 off-street parking spots, 6 swimming pools (for condominium residents), and 12 tennis courts on a public park situated in front of the Santa Monica Shores towers. The approval came with a number of conditions, however. One of those conditions was to submit for approval a more detailed beach access and park improvement

¹³ “SM to Review Revised OP Plan”, *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, July 12, 1976

program that would include landscaping in the beach parking lot across the street, upgraded bicycle access to the beach, and the on-site park. In reviewing the detailed plans for the public park Don Neuwirth pushed for a basketball court:

“They originally came in with tennis courts. But I also required them to put in a basketball court. I wanted kids in the neighborhood who were not necessarily going to be playing tennis to be able to take advantage of the open space. So I don’t remember how many basketball courts I required but basketball courts were equated with black kids. And that was something that I was particularly interested in. The city really wasn’t.”

Neuwirth’s vision for a basketball court was included in the next draft of the site plan and was accepted in April 1978. In addition to the basketball court, the park would include 6 tennis courts, 2 paddle tennis courts, and a large grass mound which would provide pleasant views to the ocean. Compared to the project’s density and housing element, the inclusion of public space, and the demand for two pedestrian accessways, the specific design of the park received relatively little attention. As late as 1983 some community organizations were still under the impression that the park would consist solely of tennis courts.¹⁴ But once Don Neuwirth pushed for a basketball court it was along for the ride. Landau himself was a basketball fan and had no problem with its inclusion.

While this plan had wide support and generated another round of optimism from city workers that they were finally about to clear their federal debt,¹⁵ changes to the city’s politics once again put the project in jeopardy. The activist movement in Ocean Park which began in the early 1970s had continued to gain traction through the rest of the decade. In 1978 Reverend Jim Conn, a politically progressive minister, and one of his congregants had applied for and received

¹⁴ In 1981 a letter from a coastal commission staff member to the director of the redevelopment agency, the commission indicated that it had not yet fully approved a plan for the park and the open space element. While Landau would later claim that the basketball site plan was approved in April 1978, a basketball court did not appear on any official drawings until 1982. This leads me to believe that the basketball court was discussed and agreed upon through informal discussions between Neuwirth, Landau, and the redevelopment agency.

¹⁵ “Ocean Park Still a Pumkin: Princely Vision Fades for Cinderella Project”, *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 1977

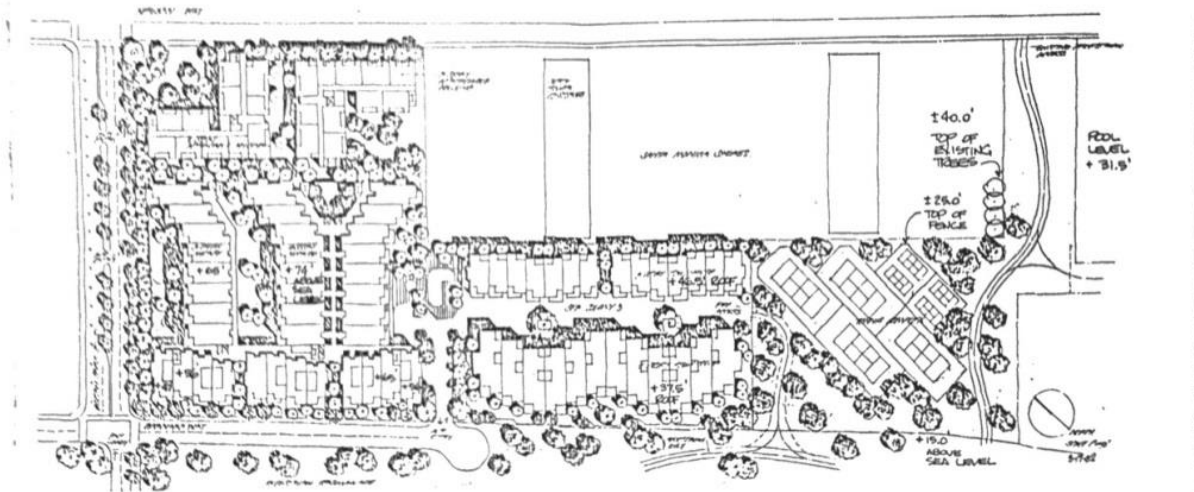
federal funding for the Ocean Park Community Organization (OPCO). The money came from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) which had been formed by the Nixon administration to fund local police initiatives. Meanwhile Tom Hayden's Campaign for Economic Democracy (CED) had also settled in Ocean Park and helped gain a political foothold for progressive politics in Santa Monica. Members of these groups also contributed to a local political organization called Santa Monica for Renter's Rights (SMRR) and by 1981 they had won a majority on the city council, passed a restrictive rent control ordinance, and placed one of their own- Ruth Yannata Goldway- as the city's mayor. From that point on Yannata Goldway was practically synonymous with progressive politics in Santa Monica, dubbed "The People's Republic of Santa Monica" by conservative critics.

By the time that Yannata Goldway took office, Landau had all but completed the first set of condominiums on the southern portion of the project and was ready purchase the northern tract of land. The coastal permit came with strict conditions about the precise sequencing of building and the city was already supposed to have begun construction on the park and pedestrian accessway. Through the political turnover those requirements had been largely ignored and by the end of 1981 Landau was prepared to sue the city for \$23 million in lost profits if he was unable to build the next set of condominiums. That law suit created substantial risk for the city. While Yannata Goldway was not fond of the idea of building expensive condos on the beach, she was ultimately forced to realize that she would put the city at great financial risk if they didn't sit down to negotiate a new deal with Landau. Many local residents had begun to resent the idea of paving over the public golf course and Yannata Goldway told the LA Times, "I share the opposition of the Ocean Park Community to the project. But, as mayor of the city I

will not take any action that would put Santa Monica in financial jeopardy.”¹⁶ She felt that her hands were tied by the missteps of the previous administration and ultimately entered a new round of negotiations with Landau.

In April of 1982, the city announced its settlement with Lincoln Properties. In exchange for dropping its law suit Lincoln agreed to pursue a slightly different project plan that was more compatible with the political sensibilities of the new progressive council. The settlement agreement would allow Lincoln to purchase more of the redevelopment land, including more of the most valuable land on the western edge of the project facing the ocean. In exchange Lincoln would give up land on the northeast corner of the project which the city would develop as permanent low income housing. Because of the increased housing density, this plan would consequently reduce the size of the park from 6 to 3 acres. In this smaller space the city proposed a complex of four tennis courts and four paddle tennis courts. The basketball court was silently removed from consideration.

Figure 8 - 1982 Settlement Agreement Plan includes reduction in park space (bottom right), no basketball court, and increased residential density for low and moderate income units (top left). The plan provided for more funding to enhance park facilities to the west and north of the project along the oceanfront.



¹⁶ "Ocean Park Residents Ready to Fight \$1 Million Condominiums," Los Angeles Times, August 30, 1981.

In order to purchase this more valuable tract of land Lincoln would pay the city an additional 7 million dollars- a sum that would significantly improve the city's financial situation and create a pool of money with which they could move forward with long discussed improvements to open space along the oceanfront just west of the project site and north of the beach parking lot. But while this compromise seemed ideal to the city redevelopment agency and progressive city council, a new wave of neighborhood activism from project neighbors and political opponents of Yannata Goldway began to push back.

Learning of these negotiations Liucijia Baskauskas, a young mother and university professor living in the neighborhood immediately north of the redevelopment project, revived a non-profit community group called the Santa Monica Homeowners and Tenants Association (SMHTA). SMHTA was first organized in the 1950s to battle the initial urban redevelopment program. Though that early phase of activism had failed to stop slum clearance completely, they had at least saved the blocks north of Ocean Park Boulevard where Baskauskas and husband, Stephen Anaya, moved two decades later. Today those blocks serve as an aesthetic reminder of the quaint beach homes that were wiped away by the redevelopment project in the 1960s.

For Anaya, Baskauskas, and other members of the SMHTA, the settlement plan was an insult. Most infuriating was the idea that the city claimed that the new proposal increased the overall amount of park space by moving the park from project land to already open space next to the beach. What mattered to Baskauskas and Anaya was not parks per se, but openness for its own sake- a lack of density, a lack of buildings, and a lack of traffic. The bottom line was that the Settlement Plan would put more buildings in the project and cast a larger shadow onto her neighborhood. In exchange, the city would receive a larger payoff that would go to support political allies in OPCO and SMRR.

With the action set to switch from municipal politics to the Coastal Commission, Baskauskas sought and received both legal and financial support from Larry Kates, the owner of the Santa Monica Shores towers. Kates was still concerned that the city might pursue a project that would block views from his property. Though he would not have a strong legal argument against the new project he had his lawyer, Sherman Stacey, begin to organize legal resistance on behalf of community members. Stacey recalled:

“We were acting in the manner in which it often goes when you have anti-development. Somebody has deep pockets, but other people may have rights that Kates would not. Kates would not have been the most sympathetic of plaintiffs. A big owner of giant building. Baskauskas was much more sympathetic and willing to [sue].”

So in August 1982, Sherman Stacey filed a law suit on behalf of Baskauskas and her neighbor Bernice Marshall arguing that the city was in violation of its 1977 coastal permit, had failed to produce the necessary environmental impact research, and should be legally prohibited from going forward with any plan that would sell a part of the project’s open space element. While the law suit created some risk that the Settlement Plan could ultimately be turned back in courts, the city went forward with their coastal application. In preparation for those hearings in the beginning of 1983 Baskauskas, Marshall, and Anaya decided to reach out to the wider Santa Monica public. With the help of a thirty thousand dollar check from Larry Kates, Baskauskas wrote a letter and SMHTA volunteers sent copies to every single residence in Santa Monica. The letter included a pre-stamped post card that people could easily send to the coastal commission to voice their opposition. “This is one of the worst events in the history of Santa Monica,” Baskauskas’ letter reported, “Now private million collar condos will be built on our last public green space by the sea on the Ocean Park Redevelopment Site.” Leading up to the hearings on the project the Coastal Commission received 10,000 pre-written postcards urging them to deny the Settlement Plan.

While the SMHTA was putting on a full force opposition, OPCO took the opposite line. In November of 1982, OPCO members voted to support the Settlement Plan as a reasonable compromise. Though they had initially voted against any new development on project land, OPCO leadership eventually came to see the Settlement Plan's greater provision for affordable housing as a much better plan for the community. Not everybody was convinced with the innocence of OPCO's position, however. The relationship between the city and OPCO became a major theme for opponents of the settlement project who argued that the worst kind of political cronyism was at play. Conservative city councilperson David Epstein called the settlement agreement's 7 million dollar price increase a "payoff" that would create housing and jobs for political allies of the city council majority. Epstein also wrote a letter in the *Santa Monica Evening Outlook* saying that "community organization" meant no more to OPCO than the workers meant to the Polish Communist Party. He called Mayor Yannata Goldway a "parlor-pink Richard Daley" and vowed to defeat her in the next election cycle.¹⁷

On the other side, Mayor Yannata Goldway distributed a response to Baskauskas' mailing in which she not only refuted the substantive claims about the Settlement Agreement, but also questioned the intentions and motivations of the Homeowners and Tenants Association. She called explicit attention to the politics of SMHTA's financial backer:

"The Santa Monica Home Owners and Tenants Organization is controlled by several Santa Monica landlords. It is funded by Larry Kates, the millionaire Canadian developer who has already contributed \$25,000 to fund Proposition 'A', the condo conversion initiative... Mr. Kates wants to convert the two high-rise apartment buildings already built at the Ocean Park Redevelopment site, which he currently owns, to condominiums. He does not want any affordable housing built that might limit his profits. He and other special interests oppose this Council's efforts to bargain with developers for needed community improvements. They want the free-ride they had under former pro-development City Councils."

¹⁷ "The Edges of the Law," *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, February 23, 1982

Suddenly the project was about much more than open space, density, and recreation in the coastal zone. It was part of the wider dispute regarding rent control, condo conversions and, in general, the battle between alternative visions for what kind of city Santa Monica should become.

In May 1983 the Coastal Commission approved the Settlement Agreement. It was a crushing defeat to Baskauskas and SMHTA. Despite all their organizing efforts, it seemed that the Coastal Commission was going to allow the city to pursue a vision for their neighborhood with greater density, more traffic, and less open air, all in the interest of unknown future residents who weren't even in the community yet. They felt like their home was under attack.

A few months later, however, the city reversed its course and announced that it would not move forward with the Settlement Plan. They would instead enact an Alternate Plan (which the Coastal Commission had also approved) which included an open space element substantially similar to the 1977 contract plan. Stacey believed that the critical turning point in the city's decision not to create a major affordable housing element on the project site was another law suit he had filed on behalf of some of the first residents of Landau's condos on the southern end of the project. He recalled:

“It was the Sea Colony law suit that broke the city's resolve. I read through all of the contracts I could lay my hands on for selling units in Sea Colony. I met with two or three dozen owners in the Sea Colony. I formed a theory that Landau had promised residents that they would have a park next to their property that would take the entire frontage in front of the Shores, including tennis courts and other facilities. And there were drawings in their promotional materials that supported this. There were a great number of things that supported the idea that the people who bought in the Sea Colony reasonably expected that Joel Landau would not interfere with those things occurring.”

Stacey argued that if Joel Landau were to build a project that did not include the full public park, he would have directly misled his buyers who had made their purchases with the belief that their view would be sustained. Landau's lawyer had written up an airtight contract

that would have made the city responsible to pay those damages. Stacey's legal theory carried just enough risk that the city would be held responsible. In October 1983, the Santa Monica city attorney Bob Myers wrote up settlement agreements for the class of Sea Colony residents and for Baskauskas and Marshall. In both cases, the plaintiffs agreed to drop their suits if the city would guarantee that the Alternate Plan would be built and no new buildings would go up on the area designated as a park in front of the Santa Monica Shores towers.

By 1986 the ecology of the coast in Ocean Park was largely transformed into what it is today. Ocean View Park was constructed on redevelopment land, surrounded by Sea Colony condominiums to the north and south and the Santa Monica Shores Towers to the east. In this last phase of OVP's development career, the park itself was just one piece of a much larger dispute. From the perspective of the Coastal Commission it was critical that the park allowed pedestrian access. For the SMHTA and project neighbors the park was meaningful precisely because it was not more density, more residents, or more traffic. While housing activists would have preferred a stronger affordable housing element, they could take solace in the fact that the development had been significantly reduced in scope from earlier plans. The city was just pleased to have a deal done and to start receiving tax increment money that would get them out of federal debt. The park was not perfect for anybody. It was, however, critical as one piece of a consensus building compromise solution in the context of much more divisive land use proposals.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how two substantially different kinds of parks came to be situated along the same beach boardwalk in neighborhoods with similar development histories and social characters. The answer lies in two very different kinds of park careers which differentially re-

shaped the surrounding social ecology. In Venice the park was created as a way of sustaining the area's vibrant public character while eliminating the vice element facilitated by privately owned recreation facilities. The early success of the park was then used to justify both resistance to broader changes to the neighborhood's urban form and further investment in public recreation facilities. The boardwalk naturally emerged as an attractive and iconic tourist destination and the basketball courts have come to reflect that character. As seen in George Hjelte's early proposal for Venice's athletic beach, the park today largely reflects a proactive vision for providing public amenities on the beachfront.

Ocean View Park has a very different history as the city of Santa Monica took a very different course on a substantially similar neighborhood. The city council was interested in extracting more value from the land and eliminating the pre-eminent urban ill of the 1960s, "blight". They engaged a massive slum clearance project which completely transformed the neighborhood's physical form and social character.¹⁸ Ocean View Park was then created through a series of political negotiations aimed at negating various alternative forms of land use: high rise residential and office buildings, shopping centers, hotels, parking lots, a golf course, and low income housing. The park was ultimately included as a bargaining chip in the process of finding a consensus solution. It was not exactly what anybody wanted, but today most of the key players see it as the product of a reasonable compromise.

These processes of park formation have differentially shaped the social ecology in the surrounding neighborhood. In doing so, they go a long way toward accounting for the contemporary character of the parks themselves. For the Venice Beach Rec Center, it is the

¹⁸ The slum clearance projects in Los Angeles and Santa Monica were part of a much larger national movement toward eliminating urban blight. Herbert Gans' (1962) study of Boston's West End stands as the primary document of a community's coming to terms with this policy. Slum clearance occurred slightly later in Ocean Park and the compromise solution has facilitated the vibrant park scene that I document in the rest of this dissertation.

adjacent boardwalk that most powerfully shapes its social character. For OVP, however, a number of ecological features were picked up piecemeal over the course of its formation career. The old POP parking lot still provides cheap and convenient parking for basketball players. Meanwhile the apartment towers and condominiums serve as walls which hide the park from the pedestrian friendly Main Street just one block east. For the men who are aware of it, the park basketball court feels like a hidden gem.

A vivid irony shoots through the ecological careers of these two parks. In Venice, the process of park formation was relatively natural, bottom-up, and without controversy. The land was purchased early on as a public amenity and the character of the facilities grew up alongside the iconic nature of the beachfront. The outcome is, by many accounts, a massive success for public space- one of the most vibrant places in the LA area. Ocean View Park on the other hand is the product of city planners trying to tame the coast through massive ecological transformation: a privately owned amusement pier, slum clearance, and redevelopment. While the history of its formation is full of drama and bitter dispute, the park itself lies relatively quiet, unknown, and obscured from the public eye. In one case, quiet and humble beginnings generated a widely known iconic space. In the other, massive political controversy generated a quiet and understated public park.

But it is to the social life of this latter case that I now turn. The understated and “hidden” quality of the park, articulated at the beginning of this chapter by Luke, is an important resource for the men who play there regularly. The park’s long and contentious history produced the very grounds on which today they find intimate meaning, produce vivid character displays, and engage cross-cultural contact.

Chapter 3

The Canopy in Play

Chapter two depicted the social production of an intimate park environment at Ocean View Park. Blocked from the chaotic winds of public life in the surrounding neighborhood a relatively stable pattern of play has emerged on the park's basketball court. For a few hours on weekday mornings, the basketball court provides a space where men with otherwise separate biographical trajectories come into sustained and vividly meaningful contact.

The OVP basketball court should be seen as a distinctive kind of “cosmopolitan canopy” (Anderson 2004, 2011). In Elijah Anderson's recent ethnographic treatment of ethnically and racially diverse public markets and shopping centers in Philadelphia he paints a picture of cross-cultural contacts which lead to an overwhelming air of civility. Canopy-goers push up against each other at the diner, revel in foreign sights and smells, hold doors, and create a common culture of mutual understanding. While the potential for acute moments of racially charged disrespect is always present, the status quo of the canopy is undeniably welcoming, respectful, and charming. The power of Anderson's account leans on the fact that many people who thrive in the canopy's civility arrive from social worlds that are otherwise racially segregated by neighborhood, school, and career. The canopy provides a respite from the harsh segregated realities of the outside world. Not so at Ocean View Park.

While historically the beaches and adjacent neighborhoods were racially segregated, many of the men in their 30s and 40s grew up in multi-cultural and multi-racial environments. Al, a Latino mailman in his 40s recalled growing up just blocks away from the park in a neighborhood that consisted of blacks, Latinos, Asians, and whites. “Everybody was together,” he said. “In fact, one time I did something to a black kid in the neighborhood and his mom came

over and told my mom! I couldn't believe it! But that's how it was. You couldn't get away with shit because everybody's mom knew everybody else's."

Public schools in Santa Monica and Venice are largely comprised of blacks, whites, and Latinos. The same is true for local private schools which pull in students from all over the Los Angeles region. Matt, the 47 year old black from Santa Monica maintains friendships from high school with blacks, whites, and Latinos. Tony, also a black man from Santa Monica, is the leader of a multi-cultural band that consists of a white classically trained trumpet player, black men from West Los Angeles, and a myriad of white, black, and Latino rappers. Many of the black men at the park are in long term romantic relationships with white women and, of those, several have mixed race children. Dominik, a half black man from Portland is in a romantic relationship with a Labanese woman and works at a yoga studio where the other employees are primarily white, Asian, and homosexual. For those who work in the restaurant and bar industries by the beach, their work worlds are every bit as racially diverse as the park. Tomás is a perfect example. As the child of Mexican immigrants he speaks Spanish comfortably with bus boys and cooks while also organizing events at his restaurant's bar, a task which requires coordinating the establishment's wealthy white owners and managers, black disc jockeys, and racially diverse servers and customers.

So in the lives of most players the OVP basketball court is not uniquely meaningful for its level of ethnic diversity or cross cultural contact. So if this park does not pull people together out of entirely segregated worlds, what kind of integrative experience does it facilitate? Compared to Anderson's canopies the park provides its own unique flavor of integration. Anderson's shopping facilities are mainly spaces where civil inattention rules the day (Goffman 1963). While ethnic others situate themselves against and around one another, in general they

politely ignore the intimate details of each other's actions until some practical necessity or idiosyncratic interest pulls them into a more focused encounter. By contrast, at the OVP basketball court players arrive with the explicit intention of engaging others in active, social, physical, moral, and intimate ways. They come explicitly to mix up in focused encounters with an array of others, ranging from close friends to unknown strangers.

So this is a canopy characterized not by fleeting interactions between individuals from segregated social worlds. But neither is it a controlled form of integration manicured by prior affiliations or organizational authority. What is unique about this place within the ongoing lives of the men is that they anticipate openly engaging others with very different histories at the park, different practical interests in the game, and different degrees of attachment to one another. For different men, the park facilitates a different balance between their anonymous public selves and their idiosyncratic private selves. In this chapter I examine the range of that variation, showing the different ways that men organize their lives around participation in the park basketball games. Then I point to processes through which, holding the park in common, some men become more intimately involved in one another's off-court lives.

Diversity under the Canopy

Games at Ocean View Park consistently run on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings. Any newcomer who inquires as to when to find games at the park will readily be given this schedule. But regular participants may go out of their way to encourage particularly talented and skilled newcomers to come back at these times. There is by now a sufficiently large and amorphous network of men who know about this schedule and, to different degrees, organize their lives around participating.

In addition for a love of basketball and knowledge of the game, the men who participate share a lifestyle that allows the flexibility to participate in a mid-morning weekday basketball game. Many professional occupations would not allow for such participation. Those working in primary education, in finance, or in municipal and government occupations cannot typically manage time off on weekdays to participate in park basketball games. For this reason, the park often hums with additional activity on national holidays which afford a variety of non-regulars the option of going to the beach and stumbling onto the game.

But despite the apparent limitations of the weekday schedule, there are in fact a wide variety of professions and occupations which afford men the opportunity to participate. Most notably, the Santa Monica and Venice bar and restaurant industry employs a vast number of men in their twenties and thirties who work primarily in the evenings and nights. Similarly, those who are able to support themselves working as musicians, rappers, and entertainers tend to have their days free. College students, doctors, entrepreneurs and business owners, and workers in the tech and retail industries are also able to arrange their schedule to leave at least some weekdays relatively open. On these grounds I fit right in as a graduate student, an occupation that allows significant flexibility in my schedule.

The men who frequent Ocean View Park also come from different ethnic groups, religions, and social class backgrounds. Some come from stable families with college educated parents and others from relatively broken homes having had to support themselves from a young age. Joseph, an observant Jewish immigrant from Israel, owns his own hard wood floor business and owns a modest house in a largely Jewish area of West Los Angeles. The black and Latino men on average come from humbler means but the correlation is not perfect. For instance, Justin's father had a career in the 1970s as a professional football player and today owns a house

in the Baldwin Hills, a neighborhood associated with the African American elite of Los Angeles. Justin often refers to the neighborhood as the “Black Beverly Hills” and recalls being mocked as the “rich kid” at his elementary school. Today Justin’s dad is a successful business consultant and when Justin is between jobs will often pay him to labor around the house and yard on the relatively large property.

In addition to drawing on players with significant demographic diversity, pickup basketball at OVP is sustained by men with diverse practical interests in the space who organize their lives around it in different ways and maintain different logics of participation. Though the park is the one thing that many of them have in common, it is a very different place to different players. The particular balance between the randomness and fleeting interactions characteristic of the public sphere and the intimacy, warmth, and stability of private group life is achieved through the intersection of these different orientations. I now turn to four different types of park users representing different ways that men incorporate the park into their lives.

Matt, a Regular with Multiplex Relations to the Park

Max Gluckman (1955) has created a useful distinction between “multiplex” and “simplex” relationships. A “multiplex” relationship is one in which the same person is meaningful in multiple ways. If one’s neighbor is also their lawyer, religious leader, and business partner they have a relatively multiplex relation. While Gluckman saw multiplex relations as primarily characteristic of pre-modern societies, the distinction is useful in differentiating the kinds of relationships that men sustain to the basketball court at Ocean View Park. Some men who frequent the basketball games at Ocean View Park orient to the park in ways that implicate multiple facets of their life. In doing so the park becomes deeply self-evocative as a place that anchors their sense of self and their sense of place within the city.

Matt's relationship to the park is emblematic. He is a 47 year old black man who grew up in Santa Monica, just a couple miles from the court. He attended Lincoln Middle School on the city's more affluent and Caucasian north side. In the context of wealthier and whiter circles he refers to himself as just another "hood nigga," recalling experiences running the streets of Santa Monica and Venice with childhood friends. At the park Matt's speech is full of slang and profanity. But he occasionally laughs at his ability to fool white Santa Monicans into believing that he's not from the "hood". Demonstrating his performance one day, he put on a stereotypical white voice, stood up straight, and extended his hand in a straight hand shake that differed dramatically from the 'daps' and hugs that he regularly exchanges with players at the park. His ability to "code switch" is uncanny (Anderson 1999).

The creation of Ocean View Park in the 1980s was very meaningful to Matt. Before it was built he was a regular player in Venice and at other parks in Santa Monica but recalls smoking weed and listening to music in the giant beach parking lot before it was under such close scrutiny by the city's police. When the new beachfront park was placed in his native southern Santa Monica neighborhood it seemed like a new home. Almost immediately he began hooping at the park and has never been a regular player at any other pickup game since.

One day Matt bragged to a small crowd of onlookers about how he used to dominate the basketball courts at Venice Beach, just a mile down the road. I asked why he doesn't play there anymore. "You know it's funny," he pointed at Tony and continued, "We used to hoop down in Venice and those niggas would be like 'ya'll from Santa Monica'! But then we'd go hoop in Santa Monica and they'd tell us we was from Venice! So we didn't really fit anywhere. And of course we'd run them all off the court and we'd almost get in fights!" For Matt the court at

Ocean View Park is symbolic of his place in the local ecology. Growing up in the southern part of Santa Monica, this court represents a kind of home territory.

Beyond just talking about his past, Matt's participation in the basketball games at Ocean View Park implicate many facets of his life. The park is a primary site in which he experiences and sustains many important relationships in his life. Tony and Jeff, both regulars at the park, are friends from his childhood. Though Jeff didn't start playing basketball until later and life, Matt and Tony were high school teammates and often talk about their history playing ball together and what has become of various teammates. In addition to seeing Tony at the park, Matt is a regular at a local Santa Monica bar where Tony's band has a recurring gig. He proudly wears the band's t-shirt to the park, displaying a solidarity that exists beyond the bounds of the park itself. This solidarity of course is only observable to those other players who are aware of Tony's band. Jeff and Matt occasionally bring their respective girlfriends together for nights out drinking, but Ocean View Park is their most consistent form of contact.

Matt also occasionally allows outside aspects of his life to enter and shape his time at the park. At one point during my field work he went through a difficult divorce with the mother of his children. He explained to me that he just wasn't happy anymore and with only so much more time on the earth he wanted to do what was best for himself. His kids were old enough to be moved out of the house and Matt felt justified in pursuing new relationships that would make him happy. While his ex-wife rarely visited the park, Matt's new girlfriend often sits on a beach chair watching our games. Between games Matt will sit with her, sip coffee, and smoke cigarettes while shouting words of advice and encouragement to players. When his daughter was participating in the college softball world series, he brought his iPad to the park so he could

check the score of her game and announce the outcome of her at-bats to anybody who would listen.

Today Matt owns a car detailing company that operates out of corporate parking lots. But before that career he was a basketball coach at Santa Monica High School and the local Boys and Girls club. In that capacity he provided coaching and mentorship to many hundreds of local kids. Among those kids a few are regular pickup players at Ocean View Park. When those players succeed at the park Matt enjoys taking minor bits of credit. When they lose or turn the ball over he will call them out yelling, “Julio! Who taught you to shoot like that! I know it wasn’t me!”

Occasionally some of Matt’s former players who are not regulars will show up at the park and give him a warm embrace. When they play at the park Matt tells stories about teams from the past and shaping their talent. One of his former players plays for a prominent Division 1 basketball school and Matt will often announce his stats from the previous night’s game and take pride when the TV announcers compliment his play. When the team competed in the “March Madness” NCAA tournament, Matt invited a number of park regulars to his home for a barbeque and viewing party. When the tournament was over the player and his father came to the park to watch Matt play in the pickup games and brought him a jersey which he now proudly wears around the city.

Wayne, another of Matt’s former players was an elite high school prospect at Santa Monica High School in the early 1990s. When Wayne was a teenager his parents were unable to care for him and Matt took him in whenever he needed a place to stay. Today Wayne lives in the San Fernando Valley and so Ocean View Park is the place they see one another most often. Wayne refers to Matt unabashedly as his mentor and when Wayne isn’t present (to avoid

stroking his ego) Matt will go on long rants about how dominant Wayne was as a high school player.

Matt's role at the park often becomes a topic of conversation for other OVP regulars. Some players talk about how he has become more of a "bully" in his old age. They believe that he's made up for his dwindling athleticism by becoming more argumentative, calling questionable fouls, and talking more "shit". Still, most regulars hold a deep (if occasionally begrudging) respect for Matt's talent and knowledge of the game. His presence at the park is so well known that many players have come to recognize and joke about the cadence and tone of his foul calls. When calling a foul Matt often yells, "Hooold iiiit!" in a raspy voice and declining pitch. This has become so characteristic of him that when players see him at a bar, club, or on the street they will call out "Hooold iiiit!" to get his attention. Matt embraces this little idiosyncratic piece of park culture, often echoing it back when other players call it out across the court. Recently Matt even wrote "Hold it" in black pen on his new basketball in the place where players would typically mark the ball with their name.

Matt's consistent presence also serves to ground the experience of other men who come to the park. His former players arrive at Ocean View Park fully expecting him to be there, for better or for worse. Those close to Matt, regardless of their regularity at the park, also tend to have multiplex relations. Lucas, for instance, a 35 year old white man was coached by Matt at the Boys and Girls club when he was a kid. Though he recognizes many players who come to play, Matt's presence at the park has been a regular part of his experience since he's been playing pickup games at the park intermittently as an adult. The basketball court, however, provides a space where Lucas can foster other kinds of relationships. He works for a financial services firm that operates through a pyramid-style marketing network. Not only is he interested

in selling financial products to players at the park, but he occasionally invites players to events at his office in the San Fernando Valley. The events are organized to draw in new sales people who will pay to participate in the pyramid scheme themselves. The company profits off of an ever expanding network of sales people and Lucas is incentivized to capitalize on the social network he already has. The basketball court is one place where he seeks to pull people in. While I haven't known any player to involve themselves in the company beyond the initial meeting, many have attended one of these events out of curiosity for Lucas' enthusiasm. For Lucas the basketball court is simultaneously a place of play and business.

The presence of these multiplex relations at the park reveals the possibility that players can be more than just playmates to one another. A few attend the same church and some others go to the same private gym. On any given day Matt can anticipate that some number of meaningful others will be there. Those others are significant to different moments of his biography and Matt allows for a relatively easy flow of sociality from his life away from the park and his life at the park. His sense of self is, in a way, scattered across the social ecology of the basketball scene. His life at the park and away from it are mutually implicative, each deeply shaped by the other. When other park goers form a relationship to him, they immediately feel connected to a great piece of the scene.

Robbie, a Regular with Simplex Relations to the Park

Few players at the park have a relationship to the scene that is as multi-faceted and deeply integrated into their lives as Matt. There are, in fact, a great many players for whom the park is something closer to a side engagement, set apart from the rest of their lives. Robbie represents the extreme. Now in his mid-30s, Robbie grew up and went to high school in Culver City, about 7 miles inland from Ocean View Park. He played basketball for a couple years in

high school but ultimately wasn't motivated enough to stick with the team. Compared to the structure of organized basketball, he preferred a lifestyle of rolled cigarettes, spliffs, and exploring the city on his skateboard. After high school he stumbled upon the Ocean View Park basketball game while riding his skateboard with a friend. They jumped in the game that day and Robbie was hooked. Though his friend never came back, Robbie has now been playing at the court for over ten years.

Robbie's athletic talent is obvious. He is 6'3 and very slim, but he runs and jumps gracefully. He glides across the basketball court and seemingly never stops moving, a constant nuisance to his opponents but a pleasure for his teammates who can capitalize on the attention that he commands from their defenders. In the last few years, however, Robbie has suffered a variety of injuries, especially to his back. While he used to be universally understood as one of the most dominant players at the park, more recently players talk about how he simply isn't what he used to be.

Drinking beers together at a nearby café, Robbie and I discussed his relationship to the park. Though widely appreciated as a basketball player, he always resisted allowing other players further into his life. On a number of occasions players had invited him to events and to hang out away from the park, but he was never too interested. "I don't feel like I have much to say to them. I see them as friends but as 'single serve friends'. They serve this one single purpose."

Robbie felt like he didn't have much in common with the other players. Though it's not immediately obvious by his light skin, Robbie is ethnically Indian. He was born in India while his parents were studying under a well-known Buddhist Guru. After working as a low level assistant in the entertainment industry for a couple of years after college he decided to go back to

school. He earned a Master's degree in theology from a nearby private university. He loves meditation and yoga, often striking impressive poses as part of his warm up routine at the park. We bonded one day when he brought a copy of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* to the court and we talked about philosophical pragmatism. He enjoys thinking deeply about the spiritual and existential nature of the world, about the cycle of reincarnation, and about meditation. These conversations, Robbie feels, don't resonate with many others at the park.

Further, unlike many other players Robbie feels deeply conflicted about spending time at the park. He talks about it like an addictive drug habit that he can't quite shake. "For somebody who wants to live a contemplative life, basketball demands too much hubris and ego," he told me. When he gets caught up in the passion of the game, his desire to win, and to achieve personal glory, he experiences emotions that conflict with his spiritual sensibilities. But Robbie loves to play and regularly gives into that desire despite his better judgment. Embodying that emotion while explaining it to me, he put his arms straight out in front of him and dropped his hands toward the floor like a zombie drawn uncontrollably to the court.

Robbie makes a minimal stipend for his work helping his parents' Guru translate scripture into English and generally can't afford to go out to eat or drink. But this never seemed to frustrate him much. As a vegetarian, he finds that he prefers to eat at home anyways and between basketball, his skateboard, and taking the bus to his girlfriend's house he has managed to organize his life around extremely inexpensive forms of entertainment in the city.

His relationship to the court was crystallized for me one day when I found out that "Robbie" isn't his given name at all. With his family, at work, and in school he's always been known by his given Indian name, Vairat. The first time he came to Ocean View Park he called

himself Robbie and has used that as his name on basketball courts ever since. On several occasions this information has leaked to other players who have encouraged him to go with his “real” name. One day Tomás yelled to him, “Come on man! We should call you Vairat. You could be ‘Hot Vairat!’” But Robbie resisted, “I like having an alter ego out here man!”

In 2013 Robbie began telling me that he was thinking about moving to India. As an adult he has visited every couple of years and while life there is less comfortable in many ways it also feels very authentic to him. He was confident he’d be able to get work there with his parents’ Guru and pursue a spiritual lifestyle. He wanted to leave behind drama with his girlfriend and the growing frustration of never having enough money in Los Angeles. Robbie never told other players much about this plan and at some point he stopped showing up at the park. I never had a proper goodbye. His name (Robbie) occasionally pops up in conversations about park regulars who haven’t been around in a while, but the vast majority of men have no idea what happened to him.

While Robbie represents an extreme version of the simplex orientation toward the park, a number of players sustain long-term participation in the basketball games without allowing the scene further into their lives. One style of park use that fosters this kind of relationship to the scene is orienting to the basketball games as a replacement for using a private work out facility. Jacob, an ER doctor who is a long time player at the park explained to me that on any given day he has to decide whether he wants to go to the gym or to the park for his exercise. At the gym he is able to get a sufficient workout and arrive back home within an hour and a half. Park basketball, while potentially more fun, is almost always a lengthier engagement. Further, because of the potential randomness of crowd and the wait, he might only be able to play a game or two before he is forced to leave. The gym provides a much more predictable experience.

Still, Jacob often chooses the basketball court because he loves to be outdoors and because he enjoys the competition and camaraderie. But changes in his life can also change the daily calculation. Since he had his first child the efficiency of the gym has tended to win out and his presence at the park has become more intermittent.

But if Joseph's relationship to the park is not as multifaceted as Matt's and his athleticism significantly less than Robbie's, his presence is still very much appreciated. He is, for the majority of the players at the park, a known stranger. And in part because he is lovingly referred to as "Doc" everybody is well aware of his profession and seeks him out for medical advice. He regularly answers questions about aches and pains, stretching routines, and medical insurance problems. In an extreme instance, Justin even asked Doc for advice on how to pass a drug test for a job though he'd been regularly smoking marijuana over the previous month. Though Doc has occasionally expressed to me his frustration with marijuana's presence at the court, he is never judgmental. He just smiled and told Justin about some products that he knows to mask the presence of marijuana in urine. Although he doesn't sustain deep off-court relationships with other players, Doc's presence is part of the court's charm. The majority of players don't otherwise participate in social circles with ER doctors at elite medical institutions.

Clint, a Seasonal Participant

There is inevitably some fluctuation in every player's participation in the park games. Matt will occasionally travel to watch his daughter play softball, Tony will take his band on tour for a few weeks at a time, and Jacob will take on a work schedule that makes participation in the park games more difficult. For others their fluctuating participation is based on relatively idiosyncratic life circumstances. When Justin was hit by a car while riding his bike he was forced to have arm surgery that kept him off the basketball court for several months. Dominik,

an avid fitness enthusiast, will occasionally get into a workout routine that doesn't provide as much space in his schedule for basketball at the beach. The more multiplex their relationships at the park the more their absence becomes a common topic of conversation and concern.

But beyond these idiosyncratic and personal rhythms of participation, there is a class of player whose participation is entirely organized around periods of consistent participation followed periods of complete absence. Typically these seasonal patterns of participation reverse seasonal patterns of work responsibilities. Men who work in education or themselves go to school are commonly only available during the summer months.

Clint is emblematic. He's a 44 year old white man who works as a Physical Education instructor and a basketball coach in the San Fernando Valley. During the summer, however, he need not make the daily drive across the city and his schedule opens up leaving room for weekday basketball games. He's about 6 feet 7 inches tall with brown hair and leathery tan skin. He moved to Ocean Park about 7 years ago specifically because he loves to hang out in the sun at the beach. The summers afford Clint the opportunity to plan long and active beach days and in the years I've known him I've never once seen him with a shirt on. In the morning he'll pack a bag with a basketball, a paddle tennis racquet, sun screen, several bottles of water, and extra socks. He then hops on his bike and rides three blocks to the beach where he'll spend his day bouncing back and forth between the Ocean View Park basketball court and the Venice Beach paddle tennis courts.

As a younger man Clint played division 1 basketball at a public university in Montana. That experience continues to pay off as earns a modest living teaching children the nuances of the game's skills and strategies. But because so much of his sense of self is tied up in the game, he has strong and specific beliefs about the way basketball should be played which often leave

him frustrated with the quality of play at OVP. “A lot of these guys never played real basketball,” he told me. “They’re just here fucking around. And they never make the right passes or cuts. It ruins the fun!” For this reason Clint spends a lot of time playing in formally organized basketball leagues with friends from the Valley. “I pick my teams for the league. They’re mostly my friends but they’re guys who know how to play the right way. The ball moves man. You know? It’s not this bullshit standing around hoping somebody can play the right way.”

Clint also senses that the quality of the play trails off as the day wears on. So he often tries to get to the park early, play in the first couple of games, and then ride his bike south toward Venice Beach where he participates in another vibrant pickup sports scene. The paddle tennis courts in Venice are in some ways even more diverse than the Ocean View Park basketball court.¹⁹ For one, men and women often compete with and against one another. The mean age at the paddle tennis courts is slightly older than the basketball court, but in terms of class, status, and race it is every bit as diverse.

Because each paddle tennis player is only competing against one or two others, however, regular players do a lot of work to find matches against particular others who they know to be roughly equal in talent. Novices rarely compete against experts. For this reason Clint often calls and texts people the night before to arrange a time to meet at the courts to play a game. And once he found me a worthy competitor I was placed on his short list of people to contact. Compared to the pickup basketball scene he maintains more control over the quality of his competition at the paddle tennis courts.

¹⁹ There are a few paddle tennis courts at Ocean View Park, but they are even more hidden than the basketball court. In my entire time playing basketball at the park I have never once seen them used. While the intimacy of the basketball court at OVP presents a counterpoint to the very public courts at Venice, the abandoned and ignored paddle tennis courts represent the opposite extreme.

But if Clint's experience at the paddle tennis court is slightly more pre-arranged than at the basketball court, he also revels in the paddle court's relative publicity. He prefers to play on the court closest to the Venice boardwalk where he can watch beautiful women walk by and occasionally flirt with those who stop to watch him play. The same is not true of his preferred pickup basketball experience. Even more than his frustration at Ocean View Park, he hates the basketball at Venice which he sees as deeply corrupted by ego maniacs who play to the crowd and bait him into fights. In part, Clint's relationship to basketball is more deeply self-evocative. As a coach and competitive player, more of his self-conception is tied up in the game. Comparatively, as a relative novice at paddle tennis Clint is just learning how to play the game and takes his performance less personally.

And so during the summer months Clint plays basketball at Ocean View Park, paddle tennis in Venice, and rides his bike along the boardwalk while enjoying the people watching and the beautiful women. After a long day of recreating in the sun, he returns to his apartment complex to nap, eat, and occasionally swim in the pool. These summer days provide him with an idyllic sort of fun that justifies the slightly higher rents that come with living in proximity to the beach. Though he can only enjoy long beach days like this during the summer, after several years his presence is well known at Ocean View Park. Even during the winter, Clint's idiosyncratic style resonates at the court when Jeff performs an impression of his surfer-dude nasally voice and cadence, "Come on guys let's play! Or I'm just gonna go play paddle man!" When other basketball players found out that I had been playing paddle tennis with Clint they were curious to know about the scene and whether Clint was as skilled as he claimed.

Max, another white man in his 40s, presents another case of seasonal participation. Trained as a fine dining chef, he works year-round for a wealthy family in Austin Texas. He

prepares two to three meals a day for the family and sometimes prepares food for an entire dinner party. But the summers are so hot in Austin that the family makes yearly trips to a second house in the hills of Malibu, the beach community just north of Santa Monica. The property is so large that Max and his wife have a separate guest house where they can sustain relative privacy while Max makes daily trips into the main house to prepare meals.

Max is also responsible for the majority of the grocery shopping for the household and he makes weekly trips into Santa Monica to buy fresh ingredients at particular grocery stores and farmer's markets. When he stumbled across the basketball game at Ocean View Park he began pushing his shopping responsibilities earlier into the morning so he could start coming to the park for a couple of games before going back to Malibu to begin preparing dinner. As a talented basketball player Max's presence is always appreciated and gradually other players have come to learn of his profession and refer to him as "Chef".

So while seasonal players like Clint and Max don't organize their lives around the park all year long, they can still easily be part of the court's local culture and lore. For the players who have played at the park for several years, their presence is part of the court's yearly cycle. The games typically dry up a little bit during the winter and then spring back to life during the warm spring and summer months. In part this is because consistent sunny days encourage regulars to come to the beach. But it is also a time when a number of known strangers have more flexibility to participate regularly.

Jean Phillippe, a Memorable Visitor

For the vast majority of players present at the park on any given day, their participation is shaped by the fact that they have played there before and are expected to play there again. It is not at all uncommon, however, for a player to arrive at the park who has never before been seen.

While regular players anticipate encountering enough other regulars and known strangers to form a game on any given day, they also know that they may well encounter total and unknown strangers. This, in fact, may be part of the place's charm. In a public park they might have to take on and beat just about anybody. A final style of fitting basketball at Ocean View Park into one's ongoing biography is the player who arrives once or twice and is never seen again.

For those who participate often, newcomers are relatively easy to spot. They typically approach the court by themselves, greet nobody, and quickly engage their own private stretching routine. If they do arrive with a friend they typically limit their interaction to one another. While regulars casually chat, smoke blunts, and wait for other players to arrive, newcomers often show quick and early interest in playing a game. To the newcomer the growing crowd of men appears to be a uniform and undifferentiated group of friends who have gathered to play and unless they make it clear that they are also "there to play" they fear that their presence will be neglected by insiders. Thus, they go above and beyond what is required to reveal their interest in participating. They lace up their shoes, stretch, and begin shooting practice shots long before court regulars who lounge comfortably knowing that others are fully aware of their intention to play.

Newcomers also may exhibit greater anxiety about securing themselves a spot on a team. They will often pace the sideline during an ongoing game, asking various players "Who's got next?" explicitly communicating their desire to play by requesting information about the state of the queue of next teams in line to play. Partly because the queue is literally undetectable based on visual signs, the newcomer actively seeks an "in". They hope that somebody with a grasp of the emerging order of future teams will tell them their place or provide further instructions.

Some of this anxiety is justified as court regulars might accidentally or intentionally skip over newcomers in the process of team formation. But often a newcomer will have his place secured without exerting themselves at all.

Two white guys were shooting around by themselves on the northern basket. They had arrived together with a basketball and hadn't spoken with any of the other players who were sitting closer to the southern basket. When the discussion turned toward forming teams, there was some question as to whether these men were going to play. Luke called out to them, "Hey! Do you guys want to run in a full court game? Or were you just playing around?" They turned briefly to each other and then one of them shrugged and said, "Yeah we'll play. Thanks."

The interaction revealed a slight lack of mutual understanding. Luke was merely requesting information. If the newcomers wanted to play, their spots in the first game were secure by rule. But the newcomers treated this as an unexpected offer. Luke and the rest of the players almost certainly could have made teams which excluded the newcomers since they weren't fully expecting to be included in the game anyways. The emerging collective order, however, often embraces and incorporates outsiders who do only minimal work to put themselves in the right place to be taken in by the scene.

On a newcomer's first time at the park it may not be apparent to others whether the player will ever be seen again or whether this was the first visit in a long future of playing together. After a day of basketball they may shake the newcomers' hand just the same as they do other court regulars, bidding them farewell, and sometimes going so far as to invite them back for future games. "Come back anytime!" Wayne yelled to a newcomer who was leaving the park after a long and contentious game. "Bring your boys back with you! You know where we'll be!" Wayne's invitation to return was produced as a challenge. If the newcomer was unsatisfied with losing, he should simply come back to play again.

One day I spoke to a young black man who was in town for the weekend from his home in Seattle. He was considering moving to Los Angeles to work at a tech company in Venice and stumbled across Ocean View Park while going on a jog to the Santa Monica Pier. He figured he'd stop in for a game as long as we were playing. On another day two black men came to the park because one had just moved to Los Angeles from Virginia. The local resident had taken the day off work to show his friend a nice first day in the city. He told me that years earlier he had played at the park years earlier but didn't recognize anybody present that day.

While these idiosyncratic life circumstances bring a trickle of newcomers to the court who are never seen again, occasionally newcomers leave a more lasting impression. During one summer a French tourist named Jean Phillippe spent about two weeks staying at a hostel in downtown Santa Monica about a mile from the court. He arrived late in the morning on his first day at the park and watched the session's conclusion. But when we were done playing he picked up a stray basketball and began shooting practice shots. Through a thick French accent he asked a group of us when we played, told us he was in town for only a couple of weeks, and promised to return for a future game. Nobody paid him much mind.

But for every Monday, Wednesday, or Friday that Jean Phillippe was in Santa Monica he returned to the court to play with us. It wasn't just the basketball that excited him. On the sideline, he wanted nothing more than to talk about international and professional basketball.

Cole and I were chatting about his days playing high school basketball and the players he competed against in the LA area before his brief career playing college ball. He mentioned a couple of players who went on to play high level college and professional ball. Jean Phillippe quickly butted in. "Who? Who are you talking about?" Cole simply repeated the names and Jean Phillippe shook his head. He hadn't heard of them. "But who is your favorite NBA player!?" Cole didn't respond immediately and made a joke about another obscure player. Jean Phillippe insisted, "No but who is it? Is it Kobe?" Cole paused again. This isn't the way players at the park typically talk about the NBA. "Yeah it might have to be Kobe I guess." Jean Phillippe jumped in enthusiastically, "I love Kobe. He's great. So smooth. I like him way more than Lebron." Cole nodded and

smiled. Shortly thereafter Cole and Jean Phillippe began talking about the French national basketball team, a topic for which they shared significant knowledge and opinions.

Over the next two weeks It became clear to me that Jean Phillippe relished being around other basketball fans. Talking basketball with other men who were knowledgeable was very much part of the fun.

I asked Jean Phillippe if he was into soccer and he shrugged, “I am. It’s okay. But everybody in France is into soccer. It’s the only sport. All season long it’s soccer and then there’s nothing else. In America you have baseball and football and even hockey. In France I try to tell people about how great Tony Parker is. How clean he is. But nobody cares. They don’t care about basketball at all. But I love it!”

Jean Phillippe’s love of basketball was practically overwhelming. On the court he loved to try to play against players much bigger than him and actively encouraged me to throw him the ball so he could pass or score. “Trust me, Mike. I’ll find the open player. Seriously throw it to me!” I smiled and told him that I would. Though he wasn’t especially talented, he became a source of some comedy for other players who laughed at his accent and enthusiasm. He affectionately took on the nickname “Frenchie” for several park regulars.

On his last day in Santa Monica Jean Phillippe thanked us for playing with him and told us how much he loved Santa Monica and Los Angeles. He’d been to New York and San Francisco on this trip but LA was by far his favorite. “It’s just cool here, you know? It’s chill.” When the day of basketball was over a group of us contemplated jumping in the ocean and Jean Phillippe lingered a few yards away from us, not sure whether to stay or go. Justin noticed him standing there and encouraged him to join. And when Jean Phillippe told us in dismay that he didn’t have swim trunks Justin wouldn’t take no for an answer. “Just come kick it! Hang out! We don’t want to see your European speedos anyways. Or fuck it. Wear your basketball shorts in the water. That’s what I do!” Jean Phillippe gave in and walked with us across the parking lot

to the sand and surf. With the Pacific waves crashing over us, Justin pointed out the dolphins swimming just off shore. Jean Phillippe was amazed, “How cool!” When we got out of the water he continued to hang out and talk basketball while some of the men smoked a final blunt before all going their separate ways. As we bid farewell he thanked us vigorously for including him in the outing.

Almost 8 months later I was watching a San Antonio Spurs basketball game with Justin and Cole. Tony Parker, Jean Phillippe’s favorite player made a dazzling play and Cole commented that “Frenchie must be real happy with that one!” Justin laughed. “Oh shit, what was his name? Jean Claude?” None of us could quite remember. Cole shrugged and through a faux French accent said, “Tohney Pahrkehr is amaazing!” Justin smiled and continued, “That was cool man. I feel like we gave him a real American experience.” Jean Phillippe had left his mark on the park. In many ways it was he who had given us the experience.

Beyond the Court

Thus far I’ve articulated some of the different ways in which players at Ocean View Park relate to the time that they spend there. They find different ways in which to fit the scene into their ongoing biographies and different logics of sustaining their involvement over time. In doing so, the park comes to mean different things to different people. The basketball scene at OVP is defined by the regular overlap and focused encounters between men who sustain different qualities of involvement in the park. Some seek to maintain the park as an anonymous public place while others allow the scene to infiltrate and inform their private lives.

But the scene also potentiates the possibility that public anonymity can facilitate more private relationships that extend beyond the basketball court and beyond the park more generally. For many of the men who would consider one another close friends, spending time together at

the park demands forming up their relationship for a more public setting. The park becomes meaningful as a front stage space relative to a variety of other kinds of back stages. I now turn to the different ways that the meaning of the park is transformed for players as they step away from the park and engage one another in more private and personal contexts. Each of the following sections charts the emergence of qualitatively different kinds of back stages which serve to give particular men a new sense of togetherness-in-public when they return to the park for future play.

Extending the day at the beach

The quickest and most immediate way that players at Ocean View Park begin to develop relationships that extend beyond the bounds of the park itself is to shift their orientation from park basketball to the wider recreational ecology of the Los Angeles beachfront. What starts as merely a trip to the park to “hoop” can become a lengthier engagement when players seek out different kinds of recreation. Joseph, the Israeli immigrant who frequents the park, is fond of bringing wooden “smashball” rackets to the court and, through broken English, inviting players on the sideline to play with him on the adjacent grass. Though I haven’t seen this activity build into more a more sustained relationship it does serve to pull two individuals away from the collective and engage together in a smaller side encounter.

A further and more common step away from the basketball court is for players to suggest post-game trips across the street to the sand and ocean. For some men this becomes especially relevant during the hot summer months when, after several hours of running, the cold Pacific Ocean is especially enticing. While often grounded in the practical interest in swimming or laying out on the sand, making this move transforms their sense of who they are to one another. At the basketball court players mill around and interact with others relatively freely. Long time regulars like Matt, Tony, and Jeff regularly chat and shoot practice shots with relative

newcomers. The scene has an easy-going vibe, breaking down the sense of ‘we-ness’ with particular others and encouraging men to mix up and socialize regardless of who they know away from the park. But when players make the decision to step away from the court and cross the street towards the sand, they do so as a clear group with a clear sense of ‘we-ness’ which marks them off from the total strangers they encounter at the beach. Thus, when Jean Phillippe joined us in the ocean, the sense of incorporating him into our group was much stronger than when we played basketball with him at the court.

Going to the sand also facilitates different kinds of excitement. One day at the park a regular player named Nick told a dramatic story of how he had pulled a struggling swimmer to shore. The lifeguard was late to the scene and only helped once Nick had the woman almost all the way to safety. Matt and Justin confirmed the story and painted Nick as the hero of the day. Nick shrugged it off while criticizing the “lazy ass life guards” who care more about people smoking pot than they do about drowning swimmers. For those listening, the story demonstrated that Nick, Matt, and Justin had an exciting and eventful time together at the beach and that their relationship extended beyond the bounds of the court itself.

Going to the beach requires phases of coordination beyond what is necessary for meeting and playing basketball in the park. After playing basketball Justin, Cole, and I would often discuss a next move. Should we just head home, jump in the ocean for a quick swim, or extend the day even further by going to the liquor store to pick up cans of beer to bring out to the sand? Once on the sand, players navigate the little private spaces of other groups to choose a spot to settle down. Some men insist on looking for a group of young and attractive women to settle near and then spend some of their time on the sand trying to create a conversational bridge from our spot to theirs. “Don’t worry, we’ll watch your things for you ladies,” Justin smiled toward a

group of young women making their way toward the ocean while leaving behind their towels and beach bags. They smiled back and thanked us. As they walked away Justin wondered which of them had taken special notice of him. “Yeah right!” Cole ribbed him, “They don’t give a shit about you.”

The ocean itself provides group thrills as well. Having played water polo in high school Justin is an especially strong swimmer and enjoys playing actively in the surf. He and Junior would often bring boogie boards to catch waves while others would simply try to body surf. Regardless, we would always point out dolphins swimming passed and warn one another of massive waves coming which we would simultaneously duck to avoid the painful impact. One such extended day in the sun was cut short when Justin was stung by a stingray in the ocean and, in great pain, drove himself home. He told us a few days later that he had urinated on himself to counter the poison, a fact which became the butt of jokes over the next week.

Occasionally basketball at the park would facilitate entire days of recreation in Santa Monica and Venice. One Friday toward the beginning of my field work I missed the morning games at Ocean View Park and headed south to the courts at Venice. As is typical for a Friday afternoon the Venice Beach courts were extremely crowded and I struggled to find somebody who would help me get onto a team. My problems were solved a few minutes later when Justin rode his bike up to the court. He greeted me enthusiastically, “Yo Mike! What are you doing here!?” I explained how I had missed the Ocean Park game and that I came to Venice in hopes of finding an afternoon “run”. He told me that he played in Ocean Park and then gone for a post-game swim. “Nothing is soothing on the muscles like jumping in the ocean after you hoop!” After recounting how he had been dominant that morning in the Ocean Park games, he explained that he was on his way to the bus stop in Venice that would take him toward his house in south

Los Angeles. “I figured that I’d ride by and see if there were games. I wasn’t really planning on playing, but as long as you’re here, let’s get a run in! What’s the deal? Do you have next?”

“No,” I told him, “these guys didn’t want to pick me up. I think I’m at least a couple games back”. Justin told me he’d be right back and asked me to watch his things while he changed back into his basketball shorts in the public restroom. When he returned he approached a group of black men sitting on some metal bleachers smoking a blunt close to the court. He walked back to me and said, “Alright Mike, we’re good. We’re on next with homeboy sitting over there.” He pointed across the court to an older man with dreadlocks. Noting my look of surprise he smirked and continued, “Roll with me Mike. People know me out here!”

When it was finally time for our game to start, Justin turned his bike upside down and set it along the court’s eastern sideline, away from the group of spectators. He placed his gym bag underneath the bike and zipped up all the side pockets before calling out to me, “Mike, where’s your stuff?” He advised that I cluster my bag with his. “All kinds of people out here,” he said, “I wouldn’t trust any of them.” Given that he had been chatting knowingly with many of the people on the bleacher, I was surprised to hear him be so cautious but I thanked him for looking out for me and gladly took his advice. I grabbed my bag, zipped it up, and pushed it into a tight pile beneath Justin’s bike.

During the game Justin and I made a point of working together. After falling behind early in the game, I was dribbling the ball up the court when Justin ran past me and said under his breath, “It’s gotta be you and me Mike. We gotta try to take this over ourselves.” His comment reinforced my own sense that we were the best players on our team. To have any chance of winning, he and I would have to work together efficiently. Despite our efforts, the other team was more talented and our team lost by a significant margin.

We chatted quietly on the sideline after the game and Justin told me that he didn't think we had stood much of a chance in the game. "We were basically playing two on five," he told me, disparaging the play of our teammates. We decided to walk up the Venice boardwalk back toward Ocean View Park where my car was still parked. We stopped at a café for beer and pizza where he told me all about how he used to dominate the games at Venice. "I grew up playing out there, you know that right? The games used to be way better though. It's kind of garbage now. But I used to kill people at Venice. That was my court yo. When I was in high school I ruled that court man. Bangin' on people and shit. I can't take my shirt off like I used to, but you see how they be knowin' me and respecting me out there!"

As a symbol of his basketball past and an iconic pickup basketball place Justin was certainly proud to be remembered when he arrived at the court. He was glad to show me how he could seamlessly get himself onto a team and how, though he's not from Venice, he still holds cache with some of the other men who hoop there. But he had travelled the ten miles from his home to the beach to play at Ocean View Park not Venice. It was our relationship forged at Ocean View Park which grounded and justified his play at Venice that day. Putting our things together, working to get onto the same team, developing private strategy, we were a "with" at Venice in a way that we would not have been at OVP. Spending time away from the context which had theretofore grounded our relationship, this day was undoubtedly a turning point in our friendship.

The Challenges of a Night League

On one especially long day at the beach, Tomás, Justin, and I were driving from Venice north into Santa Monica where Tomás wanted to be dropped off at his girlfriend's apartment. We had already played basketball for several hours, swam in the ocean, and drank a couple of

pitchers of beer on the Venice boardwalk. In the car the conversation turned to the possibility that we form a team to compete in an adult men's league that plays on Tuesday nights in West Los Angeles. We began brainstorming who we would try to recruit to join the roster and, as if going through a rolodex, we began listing off possible players from the park.

Tomás said boldly, "I feel like our starters should be the three of us, Cole, and Big Tom. That's our squad right there." We all agreed that this would be ideal, but also recognized that players often flake, don't want to pay the league fee, or have night responsibilities that make it difficult for them to participate. Justin said, "I hope Cole can play, but he works nights. We gotta try to do it on a night when he's free." We began considering other players. Nick would be good if he would just accept a slightly reduced role as somebody who would come off the bench for us as a shooter. Justin suggested Richard, an incredibly talented and athletic player who is close friends with Cole. "But will Richard play hard for us?" I asked. Justin quickly took up the concern, "That's the thing. He fucking lags at the beach. But I feel like in a league he'd play hard. And we need his athleticism." I mentioned to them that I knew that Clint enjoys night leagues and that he'd give us size. Tomás responded, "I don't mind playing with Clint. He'd keep our team fun and diverse." They both thought that in a league of mostly black players it would be fun to come with a more ethnically diverse squad. They also mentioned a player named Kevin who I'd never met before. Justin described him as an "A" friend but a "C" player. Tomás responded, "yeah but he's good with all the administrative shit and keeping us together as a team. He brings a good vibe."

Over the next several weeks this discussion continued whenever we would get together at the park. Justin explained to me that "real hoopers" play in this league. He said they were mostly black guys in their twenties who are extremely athletic, many of whom played in college.

We'd need to be at the top of our game to compete. And what's more, we needed to get bigger. "At the park you and I can play inside. We can rebound. You'll see Mike, against these teams you and I are small. We're guards." For this reason our emerging roster took a big hit when Big Tom broke his arm in a car accident and stopped playing basketball entirely for several months.

The league administrator was an older black man who knew Justin from participating in previous seasons. As the point man for the administrator, Justin embraced the role of de facto team captain. As the start date grew closer our team's roster and our starting line-up became a constant topic of conversation. In addition to thinking about how to replace Big Tom, some of the conversations hovered around my place on the team and whether or not I should be in the starting lineup. Justin and Tomás disagreed on the subject. While Tomás felt that I was integral to the team's chemistry, Justin had concerns. I told them that I would be glad to play either role and gradually Justin became more forthcoming about his fear that I was neither athletic enough nor tall enough to be one of the team's best five players. He always took care, however, to couple these comments with compliments about my play and that I'd be an integral piece in our team's success regardless of the starting lineup.

This dynamic bled into our time at the park together. Justin began watching my play with heightened interest in anticipation of playing together in a more competitive environment. One day I was warming up at the beach with Jeff and Justin watched as I swished several consecutive jump shots, "There you go Mike! Looks good. We got shooters on our squad boy!" Later that day I was competing against Justin directly and made a couple of good passes. Tomás called from the sideline, "You better watch out J, he's trying to take your spot!"

On the night of the first game I was the first player on our team to arrive at the small private high school gymnasium which the league rents out on weeknights. Watching the teams

play in the game before ours I was immediately impressed by their athleticism and talent. Given the warnings I'd received about the racial makeup of the league I didn't fail to notice that all ten players on the court were athletic black men. But when our opponents for that night began to arrive I saw that in fact the league was more racially diverse than Justin had led me to believe.

With the exception of Kevin, our team that night consisted of Ocean View Park players: Justin, Tomás, Cole, Richard and myself. Kevin is a big burly white man in his 30s. At about 6 feet 2 inches but well over 250 pounds he's built more for football than basketball. But as Justin promised he brought a lot of enthusiasm to the court. During timeouts he would yell words of encouragement, remind us to keep playing hard on defense, and lead a team cheer (1, 2, 3... defense!) before we took the court again. I caught Justin and Richard sharing an ironic smile after one such cheer, mutually acknowledging Kevin's (over) exuberance.

But on the court we played well together and the season got off to a promising start. The ball moved fluidly almost exactly as we had all imagined it would. We gained an early lead and held it for the majority of the game. Andy, a middle aged black man who occasionally makes appearances at the park was playing for our opponents and became visually frustrated with his teammates as we dissected their defense. Knowing the composition of our team he pointed to Cole and advised his teammates, "He's the one guy who you can't let shoot!" But when Tomás made an outside jumpshot he snapped back at him, "Come on Andy, this ain't the park! I ain't fuckin around out here this is a league game!"

Over the course of the season, the league games provided a context in which we could all talk about one another's play in more fine detail than at the park. After games we would often review our strategy and discuss the best way to take advantage of one another's abilities. After that first victory Justin commented on the teamwork that had been forged from years of playing

together at Ocean View Park, “That’s what I love about our squad,” he said, “we all know each other so well from hooping at the park! We should do well this season.” On our way to a post-game beer Tomás also commented on some of his favorite plays of the game including his trash talk with Andy. I was taken aback, however, when the conversation turned to my play. Tomás encouraged me to be less hesitant shooting the ball, especially in certain situations, “If I get you the ball in the mid-range area and they’re not on you, don’t worry. Just fire that. Those are good looks for you. We’ll let you know if you’re shooting too much. But you know I get a little hard when you hit all those little 10 footers! Beautiful dude.”

There are not many contexts in which players at Ocean View Park would invoke sexual metaphors for talking about their relations to one another. But league games provided consistent, collective, and focused conversations on one another’s abilities and styles of play. We were able to appreciate one another, criticize one another, and work together to overcome challenges over the course of the 10 week season. Beyond the sustained interactions we also had to practically organize ourselves in new ways. In the context of the league, Tomás and I exchanged phone numbers so that we could coordinate rides to and from the gym when necessary. Though Cole often found a ride to the games, I would sometimes give him a ride home and in doing so I learned where he lived and we spent additional time together, occasionally catching the end of the night’s NBA action.

Though our season started with high hopes the remainder was fraught with frustrations and challenges. A few days after our first game, Justin was hit by a car while riding his bike down a large hill in South Los Angeles. He was taken to the emergency room where metal plates were inserted into his arm. He called me to let me know what had happened and expressed deep frustration. He had just started a new job that was going to keep him from going

to the park for daytime pickup games and was excited for the league which would allow him to continue playing and keep in touch with his friends. Though saddened he felt like he had committed to us and told me he'd stay on as our coach and manager. Over the course of the season he diligently came to the games, organized the purchase of team jerseys, washed the jerseys each week, and managed the substitutions of players into and out of the game.

With both Justin and Big Tom out with injuries, Justin reached out to two players he used to play with in past leagues. They were talented players but none of Cole, Tomás, Richard, nor myself had ever played with them before. Our on-court chemistry suffered because of it. As we started losing games, Justin took some perverse pleasure in watching us struggle without him, "I just feel like I glue this whole team together!" he gloated after one especially frustrating loss. He was met with glares and silence.

Other players didn't always find Justin's commentary or coaching style productive. When Justin told Kevin to substitute out of a game during a critical situation Kevin walked to the bench and snapped at him, "Why the fuck am I even on the team then!?" As soon as the game was over Kevin snatched up his things and stormed out of the gym. The players who had been in the game were unsure what had happened but Justin informed them that Kevin was furious about being removed from the game. The following week on the way to our game Justin recounted a series of text messages that he had exchanged with Kevin. Kevin had quit the team and asked Justin to stop texting him about game times. Justin read his most dramatic text message out loud: "I just don't like your coaching style (or lack thereof)." While Richard and Cole agreed it was dramatic Richard also understood his perspective, "This is supposed to be fun. If I wasn't playing and wasn't having fun, I wouldn't want to come either."

Our season fizzled to its conclusion. Kevin had been critical in providing rides to a 6 foot 9 inch college player, Brandon, who had played in a number of our games. Once Kevin quit, Brandon stopped coming as well. Nick had expressed frustration that he wasn't included in the original roster. And though he played a few games with us it quickly became clear that he was more intent on being invited than actually participating. He stopped showing up too. Tomás then went to Mexico for several weeks to see his family and we struggled to find five players to show up each week. In the final game of the season, Justin was forced to play with us despite the fact that his arm was not completely healed. The game was essentially meaningless as we were already disqualified from making the post-season playoffs. But with Justin back in our lineup and nothing on the line we played well together again. Justin made a game winning three pointer at the buzzer and we managed to beat a team that had beaten us several times during the season. After the game Justin was all smiles, "You guys missed playing with me huh?! Damn I wish I could have played the whole season." Though Cole had celebrated enthusiastically upon Justin's made shot, he grimaced at this comment, "Shut up dude. Nobody cares."

Our experience in the night league underscores why it is that the pickup scene is so stable. Players can arrive at the park without needing to coordinate with anybody in particular. They can be confident that the opportunity to play will be there and if they become frustrated by a teammate, it's likely that they won't have to play with him for more than a game or two before shuffling through onto a different squad. The league on the other hand requires dedication, commitment, and financial investment in particular others. While our experience was a mixed bag of success and failure, it did push many of us further into one another's lives. Returning to the park, our public place relationships were newly informed by having gone through the season

together. League and park basketball were mutually implicative. Each was simultaneously front and back stage for the other.

The Bar as Back Stage

Just as a day of pickup basketball at the park often facilitated extended days of recreation by the beach, participating in the night basketball league facilitated nights out at local bars and clubs. By chance our games were always on Wednesday nights, the same night that Tony's band had a recurring gig at a night club in downtown Santa Monica. Over the years of playing together Tomás has forged a meaningful friendship with Tony and his Wednesday nights were almost always structured around going to watch the band perform. Cole, on the other hand, always had to work on Wednesday nights and would typically have to bid us farewell.

After games Justin and I regularly debated going out to Santa Monica or calling it a night and going home. We would typically at least go back to Tomás' house with a couple of beers and, while he showered, we would hang out with his roommates, watch a basketball game on TV, and chat about that night's game. One night at Tomás' house was entirely shaped by our remaining frustrations from the game. We had been slaughtered by an opponent that had forced us into a steady stream of embarrassing turnovers. At the house we recapped the action over shots of whiskey and beers. Eventually the conversation turned to such detailed strategy that we used Tomás' billiard table and billiard balls to map out the court, players, and the various mistakes we had made. Eventually Tomás was so frustrated with Justin's inability to see his point that he called an end to the discussion, "Fuck it dude. We'll figure it out later, I don't want to talk about this shit anymore."

But mostly our nights hanging out at Tomás' were more jovial as we transitioned from the frustrations of our game toward nights of drinking and fun. Occasionally Justin and I would

agree to join Tomás to watch Tony's band. Justin would text me before the game to tell me to bring "club wear" so that we would at least have the option to go out after the game. Watching the band play, we almost always ran into other court regulars. Matt and Jeff would typically be there, occasionally with their respective girlfriends. Matt was always curious to hear about how our team had done that night and, when Justin was in the bathroom, wanted to know what kind of coach he was. Fred, another court regular, is also a part-time member of Tony's band and would greet us enthusiastically as he waited to take his turn on the microphone as one of the band's several rappers. Nick would generally show up after his shift at his restaurant in Venice was over. All the men would sip on drinks, sing along to the familiar lyrics which, and dance with their girlfriends or other women they met at the club.

This space served to solidify and reflect many of the multiplex relations that were present at the park. They would sometimes recount the exciting events from the day's action and gripe about a certain player's inability to play the game the right way. But additionally this was a stage on which park regulars became accustomed to one another's off-court lifestyles. Tomás, for instance, came to recognize my drinking patterns as reflective of my work life. When I stopped drinking early one evening he asked me, "You gotta teach tomorrow morning, huh?" I told him that I did and he slapped me on the back, "That's what I like about you Mike. Just because you can't party doesn't mean you can't hang out and have a good time." He took a long pull from his beer, put one hand in the air and swayed to the music. "This is my night off though!"

Outings to bars and clubs also served as a back stage for court regulars to review, comment on, and discuss goings on at the park. One night a group of us sat at Tomás' restaurant bar watching a Laker game and we discussed an altercation from earlier in the week at the park.

Matt had confronted and aggravated Dominik who was, at the time, a relative newcomer at the park. Dominik had already gained a reputation for his athleticism, aggression, volatility, and trash talk. On the day in question Dominik had been especially vocal and aggravated a number of court regulars with his trash talk. I captured the situation in my field notes:

When Matt scored a basket against Dominik he sneered back at him, “Little nigga! You’re too small for me!” Dominik was visibly furious, “Yeah right nigga! Old ass! You can’t guard me either. I motivate you to come out here. I’m your motivation nigga!” Matt pulled seniority, “I’ve been coming here for 20 years. I don’t give a fuck about you. I don’t even know who you are.” When Dominik scored a basket on a close shot he then knocked the ball out of Matt’s hand before he ran back to play defense. This was too far. Matt picked up the ball, walked after Dominik who was facing the opposite direction and threw the ball with some velocity at the back of his head. At that point, Dominik’s demeanor changed. He walked away from Matt and remained perfectly quiet. Perhaps sensing that he had crossed a line, Dominik opted not to push any further.

Sitting at the bar Matt talked about how he had needed to put Dominik in his place. Justin asked him, “But why is it your job to check him? I’m saying. That sometimes causes more problems than it fixes!” Tomás chimed in, “But when D hit the ball out of Matt’s hand, I knew he fucked up. I even said so right then and there, ‘See dude. Now it’s on you. Before it was both of you, but now it’s on you.’” Matt then told us how Dominik had first come to the park with a man named Dwayne who Matt had hooped with as a young man. Dwayne had told him that Dominik is his nephew and that, while he’s a hot head, is basically a good kid and asked Matt to make sure that he was treated okay at the court. Matt agreed and ever since has tried to find the right balance between reprimanding him and letting him “wild out”.

Later that night I was walking with Tomás through an alley in Santa Monica long after Matt had called it a night. He thought that Matt was partly to blame too. “He almost handled the whole thing like a ‘G’. He was quiet for the whole first half of the game. I was so fucking proud of him. But when D knocked the ball out of his hand, I could tell it was too much. Matt couldn’t

help but go back at him. That's just Matt, you know? We all know that. Dominik's gonna learn."

Nights at clubs and bars provide a certain kind of front stage. Players see one another in a new context- interacting with women, dancing to music, ordering drinks, and engaging non-players more generally. In doing so, they learn new aspects of one another's lives. But these spaces also serve as a back stage to the basketball court. Now in private, away from the park's public scene, they discuss and make sense of some of the dynamics that have been playing out such that upon returning to the park they share mutual knowledge of how each relates to and understands the scene.

Conclusion: Putting the Canopy in Play

In Anderson's account of the cosmopolitan canopy, the front stage of public spaces provides a space where people act as if group differences are forever secondary to a common humanity. For some, however, this public sensibility contrasts with more private and segregated back stage spaces which afford the opportunity to review and discuss complex racial ideologies, group differences, and struggles for acceptance. In Anderson's conception of the canopy racial and ethnic identities are rarely, if ever, explicitly thematized in public. The civility of the public space practically depends on it.

This account leaves relatively unexplored the possibility that racial and ethnic differences can be explicitly articulated in the canopy *without* undoing the air of civility and acceptance. This possibility requires that social actors understand the thematization of race as something other than vicious or divisive. So long as the articulation is experienced as appreciative, as playful, or otherwise good spirited, the civility of the canopy is not interrupted. Indeed, both Venice Beach and Ocean View Park provide regular cases of such good spirited ethnic play.

In Venice cosmopolitanism takes on an almost carnival quality. Tourists and Angelenos alike go to Venice with the expectation that they'll see something very different from themselves, something potentially bizarre. The street performers who put on shows for crowds along the boardwalk seek to capitalize on these expectations by giving passersby what they are looking for. The performers often draw on racial and ethnic stereotypes as they interact with one another and the crowd. On a number of occasions I've seen the same multi-ethnic dance crew tell jokes about black people being terrible tippers, about white people reading better than ethnic minorities, and about one of their members who is sexually obsessed with Asian girls in particular. Depending on the timing, the delivery, and the particular crowd's engagement, these jokes receive some combination of tired groans and raucous laughter.

While such jokes have almost certainly offended some, the majority of audience members give the performers leeway to invoke ethnic stereotypes that they would not risk themselves. Even when audience members are called on to take part in the performance I have never seen them participate in or articulate ethnic or racially themed jokes. And yet the general acceptance of these light hearted ribbings serves as a symbol to the crowd of the kind of place this is. It is a place so bustling with diverse groups that nobody is safe from gentle ribbing by a performer. When an audience member observes others responding to stereotypical jokes they learn that the mockery is just for fun and should be understood as well intentioned. If anything, the mocking seems to celebrate and revel in the diversity of the crowd.

The men who frequent Ocean View Park don't pay much attention to these performances when they spend time in Venice. Once when I slowed to take in a street performance while walking in Venice with Tomás he quickly chastised me, "Common Mike, what are you doing!? Walk like a local!" He darted around the crowd of onlookers as we made our way toward the

basketball courts. But if these performances aren't of much interest to Tomás, it's not because he doesn't appreciate humor grounded in racial or ethnic identities. Consider the following experience I had preparing to play at Ocean View Park:

I was preparing for the first possession of the game standing near Colin, a black man in his 40s. Tomás, one of Colin's teammates was holding the ball a few feet away from us and called out, "Hey watch out Colin, Mike doesn't like black people!" I rolled my eyes and extended my hand to Colin, having not yet greeted him that morning. Colin slapped my hand warmly and smiled while responding, "Shit, I don't really like em either!" We all laugh and Tomás walked toward the center of the court where he prepared to begin the game.

Unlike the street performers at Venice, Tomás' comment is targeted at particular people. His joke is therefore simultaneously more risky and more fun. He must trust that both Colin and I will interpret the potentially treacherous comment as mere play. Assuming we do, Tomás walks away sensing his own mastery of the scene at the park and his intimate relations with the others who are there. Through his playful response, Colin confirms for Tomás that they shared a mutual understanding of the motivations and implications of the comment. This kind of play, when done by the right people at the right time, can be part of the park's charm.

Moments of racially charged but playful banter do not happen every day at the court, but neither are they uncommon. A black man once told me (a white man) that he prefers white basketball coaches because "black guys can only coach football". Tomás (a Mexican American) often publicly refers to Julio (another Mexican American) as a "Mexican jumping bean". Tomás also occasionally wears an enormous sombrero and jokingly plays ranchero music through a speaker system, playing with his own racial identity in front of ethnic others. I've seen several black men put on a fake "white voice" demonstrating for everybody at the park how good they are at code switching when they go to high class restaurants or events.

Justin once asked me if I cared whether he enter my name as “Jew Mike” into his cell phone’s contact list. Explaining to him that I didn’t think of “Jew” as an offensive word, I told him that I had no problem with it. He laughed and told me that he’d type “Jew Mike he insist” because if anybody ever came across his phone he wanted them to understand that the label was one that I myself had embraced. Another day he extended the joke. Imagining what it would be like to attend one of my summer courses at UCLA he laughed about the idea of raising his hand to ask, “Excuse me Jew Mike He Insist, what’s the answer to number two?”

All these comments, jokes, questions, and ribbings were responded to as harmless and light hearted. It is entirely possible that players have left the park feeling offended by such jokes, but throughout the entirety of my fieldwork I have not witnessed nor been told about any serious racial animus. The fact that these playful interactions are relatively common reveals a sense of trust and intimacy among the players. They trust that not only will the target of the jokes treat them as playful but that unknown strangers who overhear will quickly learn to see these comments as a typical and accepted part of the scene. So while in Venice the “canopy in play” is constructed across the performer-audience divide, at Ocean View Park the playful ethnic banter serves as a symbol for greater intimacy and trust amongst ethnic others.

I conclude this chapter with an intimate moment born from the canopy in play. One evening at the night club, Tomás spoke frankly about his respect for Tony. He sees Tony as a kind of mentor, somebody with great moral character, a great father, and critical to the park basketball game. As an amateur photographer, Tomás had been invited to go on tour with the band up the California coast. He understood this trip as a sign of Tony’s trust in him and respect for him. He recounted to me a moment when Tony had been talking about his own children and

pointed at Tomás and said, “Might as well throw you in there too. Close enough.” Tomás admitted to swelling with pride.

An hour or so later Tony’s band was taking a break between sets and Tomás pulled me to the back of the club where he said we’d meet Tony for a blunt. The club had recently cracked down on using the back of the club so we climbed into Tony’s SUV with another member of the band. Conversations moved freely from basketball to Tony’s frustration with the club owner and his desire to play more gigs in Venice. Then Tony told us that he was preparing for a gig in which they would open for a prominent Latin American band and a majority Latino audience. He wanted to translate some of his lyrics into Spanish and needed Tomás’ help with some of the trickier and more poetic lines. “There’s some shit I’m not sure how to say,” Tony said, “Like how would you say ‘hustlin’ on’?” Tomás paused and thought about the rich metaphorical meaning that “hustling” has in hip hop culture. “What about ‘empujando la vida’? It means ‘pushing life’.” Tony smiled and said that it was perfect. “I like that Tomás. Pushing life.”

This wasn’t a moment of light hearted ethnic ribbing, but neither was it the random and fleeting cross-cultural interactions of strangers in a market. This more intimate. In this moment of literal and figurative translation Tomás helped Tony think about his lyrics in a new language, giving them deeper and more universal significance. And while it occurred in the back of a club several miles from the park, this moment was facilitated by a relationship which was sparked on the basketball court at Ocean View Park.

These moments in which racial and ethnic identities are explicitly thematized are critical to the particular brand of integration at Ocean View Park. This is far from the “melting pot” integration in which differences are effaced as when Irish, Poles, Jews, Germans, and Italians were all “integrated” into a mainstream society by becoming “white” during the 19th and 20th

centuries. While some men come to involve themselves in one another's lives, at no point has the scene at OVP become one defined by a uniform, undifferentiated "group" of insiders. Through diverse practical interests, men continue to come to the park to play, always sensing that they are engaging others with very different kinds of life experiences. Newcomers can sense the balance that exists as they can typically see that not everybody is equally "in". So at Ocean View Park differences are kept alive, played with, revealed in, and put into play. This requires that players trust that the diversity at the park is, at minimum, accepted and, at most, revealed in. And when they enact that trust through good natured joking and ribbing, they further define the scene as one which can tolerate and embrace diversity. With individual differences kept alive and open, the work of integration through play is done over and over again on each visit to the park.

Chapter 4

Synchronizing Phases of Attachment

Dominik stood on the balcony of my apartment in the Hollywood section of Los Angeles. He sipped on a cup of coffee I had just made for him and began smoking a spliff that would sooth him before heading to work. We chatted about the previous days' games at Ocean View Park and the striking diversity of men who play there. He turned to me and said, "It's like with me and you. You and I grew up completely differently. I guarantee it. But that doesn't mean we can't be boys. We fuckin bang on the same block now. And it didn't start with anything but hoop. Boom. Check ball. Hoop. Now we're tight."

Removed the basketball court itself Dominik articulated that something vividly meaningful had happened to us at the park basketball court. "Check ball," refers to the beginning of play. It symbolizes the moment in which men at Ocean View Park completely disattend from who they are to one another away from the park and begin to orient to one another solely with an eye toward the game's universe of meanings, rolls, rules, and interaction contingencies. Ironically men get to know one another through participation in an interaction context that demands they ignore prominent features of one another's lives. In this chapter I foreground that context and analyze the practical contingencies of its creation on any given day of play.

In part what is required is a solution to a practical coordination problem between the disparate biographical trajectories that I analyzed in the previous chapter. Non-pickup uses of public space demand either significantly more or significantly less coordination. Various types of social organizations motivate groups of actors to use public space together, in the same ways, at the same time. Through group membership, participation fees, formalized schedules, or hierarchical power relations organizations (families, basketball leagues, fitness classes, etc.) induce individual commitments to enter the public realm prior to and apart from the visit itself. On other hand, entering a vast public marketplace or shopping facility by oneself requires very

little mutual coordination. Individuals may anticipate the weekly or daily rhythms of crowds in organizing their trip to public places and they may ensure that a particular commercial establishment is open for business, but because they anticipate being part of a faceless crowd they need not synchronize their trip with anybody else in particular.

The pleasure of pickup basketball at Ocean View Park is sustained by finding the balance between a top-down social order and the emergent anonymous orderliness of a faceless crowd. This is neither the chaotic noise of children blasting horns independently of one another nor is it the tightly scripted and coordinated orchestral performance. It is something closer to improvisational jazz where players riff on a shared repertoire of possibilities. Without a director, the players return over and over again to pull off the scene together. On each rendition of play the variable combinations of players, the various teams, and the various in-game situations keep it exciting and interesting.

For the scene to come off players from isolated domestic worlds bring themselves into increasingly tight coordination with others. Players begin each day with only a vague sense of what time they should show up at the park. Then over the course of the day they organize their individual lines of activity more closely with and against the others who have shown up to play. When the day is over they bid each other farewell and fall back out of coordination until the next day of play. Over the day's narrative arc the men develop qualitatively different relationships to the collective scene. Through synchronizing these phases of attachment together the men at OVP create the scene that justifies their continued participation. Together they afford themselves the opportunity to make and display particular versions of self.

The empirical sections of this chapter are organized to provide insight into the progressive synchronization of individual lines of action. I aim to show how the scene's

narrative arc is built up through meaningful phases of anticipation of, participation in, and ultimately detachment from the collective scene. These phases are marked by unique interaction contingencies which generate both dilemmas to overcome and moments of excitement to revel in. When the scene is played successfully, players leave the park with the sense that they had the kind of fun that they set out for. But players can also be easily frustrated when they find that at one or more points over the course of the day they were inhibited by the misfit between themselves and the collective. Over the course of the chapter I introduce new analytic distinctions to characterize the quality of attachment that individuals experience between self and scene.

Overcoming Inertia: Going to the Park

When waking up in the morning, no player has yet committed himself to playing basketball at the park. Their presence is not expected by anybody in particular and if they opt not to go to the park their absence will receive little more than passing comment, if even that. Each player makes the decision from their own isolated domestic world. It would be easy not to go. This logic develops a tacit “inertia” to stay put (Becker 1995). The ongoingness of the scene at the park depends that enough players overcome the resistance to participate and make the opposite choice.

The situation resembles the prisoner’s dilemma. For any one player it only makes sense to go to the park if they are confident that others will be there to play with. No participation fees have been submitted and no formal schedules distributed to provide the confidence that the games will proceed as usual. During colder winter months the prison walls are thickened as there is good reason to be concerned that others are not interested in playing outside. Stuck in their isolated homes they wonder whether it is worth the risk to make the trip to the park.

For many players there are alternatives to the park which provide “sure things”. Some players belong to private gyms with basketball courts that are home to steady basketball games. Dominik often engages intense physical workouts, an activity which does not depend on the coordination with unknown others. The lack of certainty that the games will run and that the games will be “good” generates a decision context that passively resists a player’s desire to go to the park.

But for those players who have developed the first inkling of an off-court relationship, they can easily take an initial step. Soon after I exchanged phone numbers with players I began receiving text messages on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings to see whether I was headed to the park. With new confidence (or lack thereof) that others would be present, these brief conversations provided a slightly new context for their own decision to go to the park.

The inertia may be further overcome by players who coordinate transportation to the park. In the midst of my field work I became a regular driver for Dominik who, until recently, traversed the Los Angeles road system on a motor scooter, Justin whose car insurance was constantly in a state of flux, and Tomás who relies almost exclusively on the LA bus system. My days at the park would often begin while still in bed. I would receive text messages or phone calls asking whether I was playing and requesting rides to the park.

Making my morning cup of coffee in preparation to drive to the park, Justin called asking for a ride. I quickly concurred but qualified my offer, telling him I’d be unable to drive him home afterward because I had work responsibilities later in the day. We arranged to meet in a Culver City parking lot, a halfway point between our apartments and the beach which would also serve as a convenient spot for me to drop him off since he had to go to a nearby doctors’ office after playing basketball anyways. We set a time to meet and before getting off the phone he prodded me, “Hurry up Mike, don’t be late! Let’s get out there for the first game!”

So before our day had hardly begun we had synchronized ourselves by developing an outline of a plan which would frame our involvement in the games that day. Once in the car he requested

that we stop at an ATM (he owed another player cash) and a grocery store for a Gatorade (he was hung over from a night on the town). Both stops were in anticipation of his time at the park. He knew who he might see and the level of hydration that would sustain his physical engagement through an intense period of exercise.

In the car on the way to the court we would chat casually about a variety of topics- music, movies, dating, nights out in the city, and recent NBA and college basketball action. Inevitably though, stuck in freeway traffic on the way to the beach, the conversation would begin to anticipate the forthcoming day of play. We discussed previous pickup games, individuals we were likely to see, and the upcoming day of action. Occasionally we even discussed strategies for getting ourselves onto the same team. One day Justin arrived separately but insisted that we meet up in the parking lot before going to the court in order to increase our chances of playing together.

As Dominik and I played together more often we developed a comfort level on the court and our car conversations often turned toward in-game strategy. We discussed the ways we might coordinate our respective skill sets in order to influence the game more than either of us could alone. This change in conversation often came in concert with shifts in traffic. On the Santa Monica Freeway heading west, traffic would consistently open up around the Sawtelle exit in West Los Angeles where there is a density of office buildings and a long line of cars trying to exit the freeway. One day, kicking my engine into high gear and moving toward the left hand lane to speed past the off ramp, Dominik felt the rush of speed and called out excitedly, “Let’s goooooo Mike! Look for me on the fast break today! Just give me the ball and take off. You know I’ll find you for easy buckets!” The speed of my car on the freeway exactly corresponded

with his desire to play basketball in a fast, free, and athletic style. He began to anticipate feeling his engagement with the game long before stepping foot on the court.

These early-morning processes of mutual coordination served to reduce our individual risk in going to the park. The commute was less painful with somebody to talk to, the parking fee less expensive when we could split the cost, and the worst-case scenario less likely because we knew of at least a few others who would be present.

Role Distance: Playing at Play

Though our excitement to play together would increase as we got closer, once at the park the passage from the world of everyday life to the world of the game was often a slow journey. Waiting to play is an inevitable part of pickup basketball. It is a rare occasion that one's arrival exactly facilitates a forthcoming game such that they can jump straight from the world of everyday life into the world of play. More often players arrive and must wait for the collective emergence of a "spot" for them to occupy within a game. At the beginning of the day this is likely to require waiting for the necessary ten players to create a game of five-on-five.

Men vary in the way they occupy themselves during this time. They casually shoot practice shots, roll a pre-game blunt, and socialize with one another. A few prefer to remain more to themselves and sit further away from the group while listening to headphones or looking at their phone. The previous days' sporting events are a common topic of conversation as are the beautiful women walking past or through the park. But the men also organize their waiting time anticipating that they are about to embrace their basketball selves when enough others show up. But in preparing to occupy the role of pickup basketball players, men at Ocean View Park often engage in what Goffman has called "role distance" (Goffman 1961a:108). They effectively produce separation between themselves and the virtual image of self that the scene tacitly

produces for them. Before fully embracing the task of playing pickup basketball, they drive a wedge between themselves and the person that the scene will ultimately require them to be.

One such activity is “playing at play”.²⁰ In various ways players at OVP distance themselves from the seriousness of the role they are going to occupy in the game itself. They mock it, comment on it, and engage it in more lighthearted ways in anticipation of embracing the role and taking it seriously. Over the course of one Summer Robbie and Jeff would regularly challenge each other to a common basketball game called “Horse”. The game requires that the players go back and forth mirroring one another’s shots. Still wearing sandals they would attempt a slew of trick shots. They heaved the ball toward the basket while standing on one leg like a flamingo, with their eyes closed, facing the wrong way, bouncing the ball off the ground into the basket, and so on. The permutations of these trick shots seemed endless. One day Jeff invented a shot called “no neck” in which he put his ear to his shoulder while tossing the ball toward the rim. They shared long laughs and high fives when one or the other would successfully make a never-before-seen trick shot. It was a pre-game game full of silliness and playful banter. They celebrated wins and mourned losses in a half-hearted ironic way. But while fun, Horse was not the reason they came to the park.

Many men arrive at the park in street clothes and gradually proceed to “put on” their basketball bodies by ritually shedding the clothes and shoes of everyday life and getting into basketball specific gear. Though all players do this to one extent or another, this transformation provides the time to make, comment on, and play with distinctions between players’ presentation of self. Dominik became infamous for his elaborate set of gear- shoes with various sole inserts, compression shorts or leggings underneath his athletic shorts, expensive athletic socks, and a variety of hats. One day Julio noted the knee pads that Dominik was sliding over his socks and

²⁰ See Denzin (1975) for a more sustained discussion.

ribbed him good naturedly, “Are we going sky diving today D!? All the equipment you wear! Goddman!” They laughed, greeted one another, and slapped hands.

Tomás also has a strong sense of personal style at the court. He typically plays in a pair of board shorts. Board shorts, associated with surfing culture, are common street wear in the beach cities of Los Angeles but are much less common inside a basketball game. Not knowing that Tomás felt a personal connection with his style, I wore a pair of board shorts to the park and Tomás quickly called me out upon arrival, “You’re wearing my uniform today Mike! What’s up with that!? You’re stealing my swagger out here!” This became a common trope between us as Tomás would often notice and comment on my board shorts. While that first day he mocked me, on other days he went the other direction, predicting that I’d have a good game for wearing the right gear.

The very idea that board shorts represent a “uniform” is a comment on the informality of the affair. In formal basketball one could hardly be mocked for wearing the uniform. But this, after all, is “just” beach basketball. And so the comment crystallizes the distance between what this game says about us and what formal basketball says about the players occupying that role. Moments later Tomás would occupy the role of basketball player with all the seriousness, emotion, and “embracement” of somebody deeply concerned with the significance of the affair. But during our wait the distance between our activity and “real basketball” was could easily become a source of play and fun.

Role Distance: Warming

While putting on gear could be a source of play and fun, it also potentiates another type of role distance for players at OVP. As players put on basketball gear they develop commonalities between otherwise idiosyncratic body types. Their shoes all have ankle support

and good traction. Their shorts allow for fluid motion and sharp cuts. If they wear shirts at all, they wear athletic shirts which facilitate easy reaching and extension of the arms. Putting on this gear, they display to one another a readiness to populate and participate in a world defined by fast movements, sharp cuts, and quick hands. Having transformed their bodies in common ways, the monotony of waiting becomes more active and playful games gradually become more serious. When players arrive in sandals or barefoot they often gingerly step around the court, passively toss a ball toward the basket, and grimace as they shuffle after a wayward ball. But with their basketball gear on the fit between themselves and the forthcoming game begins to feel more fluid. They jump in place, jog up and down the court, and engage in shooting drills with others. Players' practice shots are no longer casual heaves or creative inventions but instead begin to mirror the focus and intensity that they will bring within the game itself.

Justin is especially fond of challenging me to pre-game shooting competitions. One day this competition took the form of a game of "Horse". But when I walked onto the court where he was holding a basketball Justin insisted, "We gotta get shots up Mike, find your own ball so we can move faster." I grabbed a loose ball from the sideline and began my turn by shooting a 15 foot jump shot. But Just corrected me again, "What the fuck you doing Mike? Only shoot threes! We're shooters out here!" I fell in line with his game by shooting all my shots from beyond the three-point arc. Our game became fast and competitive. Justin pushed me to grab my rebound and take my turn quickly and we began firing shots in quick succession. When I made a three point shot he would snatch his ball and move quickly to take his turn. "Nice hit yo," he told me as he lined up and fired a shot of his own, "but you aint gonna beat me today. No chance." His ball swished through the net as well and we both ran quickly to the next round of shots. There was no time here for chatting, laughing, or trickery.

It wasn't long before I began to falter while Justin's shot continued to shine. As my body began to tire, I slipped out of rhythm. My legs burned and I tried to overcompensate with my arms. But Justin's wrist continued to snap just the same way on each shot. His ball followed the same arc and even his misses felt like surprises to him. "Gotcha!" he called one time as he let the shot fly off his finger-tips. The ball rimmed in and then bounced out. "What the fuck?!" he called out as if some external power had intervened. He won the game moments later.

Unlike Jeff and Robbie's game of horse, this was not silly play. But neither was it the real game. It was purely about getting the feel- feeling the rhythm of dribbling and turning into the shot, feeling aching legs after many consecutive jump shots, and feeling the ball rolling off our fingers with the perfectly timed wrist snap. After several minutes of hard work we returned to the sideline breathing heavily, both of our shirts damp with sweat.

The metaphor of "warming up" is instructive. Ten minutes earlier starting a game of basketball would have felt like jumping into an icy lake. My knees and back would have ached under new stress and my joints would have creaked. I would have gasped and struggled until my body adjusted to its new surroundings. But now the transition would be seamless and comforting like stepping into a warm bath. The fit between myself and my environment would be facilitated by the body that Justin and I had just collectively warmed up.

Collective Reorganizing: Forming teams

I've been describing how pickup basketball players begin to organize themselves and their bodies in anticipation of and in preparation for entering the game's universe of significance. Feeling warm and physically ready, they may be on the precipice of making the leap into the game only to realize that others aren't there yet. Playing basketball at Ocean View Park requires a total of ten players to become ready and enter the game together at the same time. And individuals can only pass into the game as members of a team of five players. This requires a

collective reorganization of players who, having arrived as individuals, must come to occupy slots on a team.

In the context of formal leagues these divisions among players are organized beforehand and then made apparent on-site as players don colored jerseys which express pre-made affiliations. Not so at the park. Players must organize themselves into teams each day before any one of them can enter the game. The necessary quality of involvement switches from individual preparatory work of arriving at the park, getting dressed, and getting warm to the collective work of organizing the forthcoming game.

As more players arrive at the park pressure to “start” begins to mount. When there are just a few players waiting each next arrival is hardly given notice. But as the player count pushes toward ten, waiting players anticipate the need to distinguish the first ten arrivals as they are given primary rights to play in the first game of the day. Based on the first-come-first-serve policy that is broadly adhered to at the park they draw a symbolic line between the 10th and 11th players to arrive on any given day.

There were exactly ten players at the park and Jeff and Robbie had just begun talking about choosing teams when Junior came sprinting toward the court from the parking lot. Julio was sitting on the sideline and spotted him from afar. “Look at Junior run! He thinks he’s in the first game. He doesn’t know he’s number 11.” Julio laughed anticipating Junior’s disappointment. “You’re eleven June!” he called out long before Junior could possibly hear him. As Junior approached he jogged to the center of the court and faced the sideline where a line of us were sitting. He pointed at each of us one by one, dramatizing his counting. As he reached the last player he smiled and said knowingly, “So I’m ten right? Lets get this started!” Julio, Jeff, Robbie, and I laughed and Julio snapped back at him, “Yeah right! You’re eleven!” Junior dropped his head in mock disappointment and walked disheartened to the sideline where he prepared to wait for the second game of the day.

Thus far I have presented arriving, waiting, and forming teams as happening in clear temporal succession. But in this case Junior’s arrival was vividly shaped by anticipating the need to form teams. In running up to the court he embodied the work of team formation before

having even arrived. Aware that he was teetering on the symbolic line between 10th and 11th arrival he was pulled toward the park by a logic that those already present understood and amused in.

The line between 10th and 11th arrivals isn't always so clear. Especially when groups of players arrive at the same time the situation is significantly murkier. The line is also complicated by just what counts as "there". Matt, Jeff, and other court veterans often arrive very early but remain sitting in their car until a crowd begins to form. Players who had previously thought they were in the first ten are often bumped down to the second game of the day by players who have been there all along even if not visible.

Saddened that I'd have to wait for the second game of the day I told Doc, "Man, I was definitely in the first ten here." He told me that you can't just count those who are physically present. You have to count all the people taking care of their kids, those in their car, the ones who are changing their clothes, and the ones who are parking. Jeff chimed in, "Yeah the people who pull up and do a little wave right there," he pointed to a parking spot reserved for city vehicles only. Doc continued "You gotta pull up right there, either wave or honk or get out real quick. Come out here. Say 'I'm in. I'm here' and then go park your car. That's been the rule for a long time."

While Doc referred to this policy as a "rule" it is hardly uncontested or universally applied. Court veterans are easily recognized as players and, knowing this, may give a quick wave as they drive by to reserve their spot in the first game. Less familiar players can't get away with the same claim. They must put their bodies on the court to stake their claim and to be counted as "there".

For the players already at the court these complications can make the task of forming teams surprisingly complicated and daunting. They mill around engaging in separate conversations, separate blunts, separate stretching and warming routines, and must somehow be catalyzed to begin to organize themselves for play. Often the momentum builds slowly as more players arrive. One day Luke arrived late in the morning and quickly began pressing us to form

teams, “Come on guys, there are already fourteen players here! We need to get started!” Anticipating waiting through the first game, players who have arrived after the first ten are often among the first to push for teams to form. Though there was no immediate response to Luke his sentiment began to reverberate through the loose crowd until two players agreed to choose teams.

The process of forming particular teams follows a “picking” procedure that is characteristic of many grade school playgrounds. Two “captains” go back and forth selecting players to join their roster. This task is typically done with great care. They move off to the side away from the chaos of players shooting around and chatting. They pick quietly so as to avoid the implicit insult for those players selected in later rounds. The importance of this privacy is apparent when players occasionally attempt to make teams through a more public discussion.

At one point a bunch of us were sitting on the ledge talking openly about what the teams should be. Justin and Eli were both starting from the assumption that the three of us should be on one team. The other team could have Tony, Jeff, Fred, and Tyler. Both Jeff and Doc were shooting around on a nearby basket, not paying attention until a critical moment when Tyler said that it wouldn’t be fair for his team to have both Doc and Jeff, implying their equally low skill level. Jeff heard his name and snapped, “What!? I’m the deciding factor?! I don’t know how I feel about that!” He walked into the center of the circle, curious why his name was mentioned. An awkward silence hovered over the circle until Jeff spoke up, “Hey this is a closed door meeting! Players not allowed in the GM room!”

Much significance can be found in the way players organize themselves to pass through the screen from world to game. In forming teams they begin to orient to players’ in-game skill and character. If not handled with care feelings can be hurt and disrupt the smooth construction of the game itself. Knowing this, captains typically form a close huddle to avoid the potential awkwardness of having their picks publicly known.

The privacy of picking teams also reflects a concern with how the captains’ ability and skill to choose players reflects their own basketball savvy. If they pick a team that loses by a

wide margin they may feel the loss more personally. Drawing on the language of professional basketball they talk about being a good “GM” or general manager to describe their ability to effectively evaluate the available talent and organize a team that will play well together. These picking sequences can come under intense scrutiny by others interested in how the teams were formed.

Dominik and Tony privately picked teams and as soon as they were done Dominik skipped away smiling and yelled joyfully, “Wooooooo! I’ve got a squad!” Seeing his enthusiasm Justin called him over to the baseline where we were standing together and asked Dominik to recount the picking sequence. Dominik lowered his voice and told us that earlier in the week he had let Tony take the first pick so this time Tony allowed him to go first. He then recounted the order of picks, “I got Fred and he took Phil, which I knew he’d do. Then I got Mike.” With each name Jeff punctuated Dominik’s statement with “yup” as if he was checking players off a list approving each selection. Dominik continued, “Then he got Nick and I took Tomás.” Justin smiled and said, “Well there it is. That’s where he fucked up! We figured it out.” He leaned in a little closer and whispered, “How you gonna take Nick over Tomás?”

Thus far I have shown how through forming teams players are beginning to consider the forthcoming game in fine detail. They begin to consider other players in terms of their style of play and their cluster of skills and abilities, trying to select a team that is balanced by players of different sizes, skills, and abilities.

But while the process of picking teams encourages players to begin evaluating one another on the merits of their in-game abilities, they have not yet left the world of everyday life and do not completely disregard who they are to one another away from the park. Matt, Tony, and Jeff often attempt to play together. When picking teams Matt will often begin the process by demanding, “Give me Jeff and Tony” and offering the other captain two players of approximately equal talent. In that case, the first picks are not dedicated to talent level but rather to setting up equal teams grounded in long standing friendships.

This friendly style of picking teams, however, can be balanced by contingencies which encourage greater competitiveness. One day Tony and Joel picked teams in private and when they were done walked over to a small group of us sitting on the sideline and recounted what had happened.

Tony nodded toward Joel and said, “This dude’s like ‘so you probably want Jeff and Renn.’ I’m like, not necessarily! I gotta separate basketball from friendship right now. We’re gonna see how this picks out!” Joel defended his suggestion, “Usually we just pick teams though and we make ‘em fair, Tony!” Tony continued, “I’m trying to win today, look at how many motherfuckers are out here. I mean look, Renn is my nigga for life. But am I really trying to hoop with him!? I dunno. He aint my first pick!”

On a crowded day the desire to win is often heightened by the knowledge that loosing will result in a longer wait on the sideline before being able to play another game. On this day, that competitiveness transformed the quality of Tony’s picking procedure. Joel was right that Tony is often open to a more relaxed style of picking, but on this day he wanted to be more strategic. With a larger crowd threatening a longer wait Tony was already more “into” and involved in the game by attending solely to players in terms of their in-game abilities.

While friends are free to choose one another during the picking process, the first-come-first-serve policy can intervene in their desire to play together. Even the most regular and respected players cannot show up 12th and expect to play in the first game. But players have one primary source of agency in resisting the first-come-first-serve policy. They can give up their spot in the first game and wait to participate in the subsequent game with their friends. Doing so makes a symbolic statement about their friendship. Jeff, for instance, is often among the first players to arrive at the park but will generally give up his spot in the first game to play with Matt and Tony if they arrived later. Other players then try to figure out who the 11th player to arrive was and plug him into the first game.

Jeff and Matt are by now expected to play together much of the time. But when players first begin to accept longer waits in order to play together their decision can come under intense scrutiny. Arriving to the park with Dominik the two of us would typically play in the same game and very often on the same team. But one day we happened to come to the court separately and he asked me if I would wait to play on a team with him and another friend he brought to the court. I told him I would.

After I told Dominik that I'd run with him and his friend Logan, I walked over to Tomás and let him know that he needed another player because I was going to wait and play the next game. Tomás grimaced and turned his back momentarily. "Okay I see how it is. I didn't know that you wanted to play with your boyfriend like that!" As he walked away he yelled back aggressively, "It's all good, I've got my squad! We'll see you next game!" Later in the day Tomás told me somewhat more calmly, "you know the only reason why I was mad, right?" He pointed at a younger player who I recognized but didn't know well, "I snubbed my cousin to put you on my team. That's fucked up!"

Though I didn't know it at the time, Tomás had disattended from obligations in a familial relationship in choosing me to play on his team. Meanwhile I had opted for a longer wait in order to play with Dominik, making a statement about our relationship and mutual enjoyment of playing together. Feeling slighted, Tomás mocked my decision by giving it a vaguely sexual connotation. Brief moments of team formation provide an opportunity for players to implicate and signify qualitatively different relationships both inside and outside the game.

Players continue to arrive over the course of the day and fill in the sideline queue of "next" teams. They fit themselves into the collective organization created at the park by organizing teams of five on the sideline while the ongoing game marches toward completion on the court. When a game ends the losing players join the sideline queue while the next team in line steps onto the court to challenge the reigning winners. Under the cover of the ongoing game, some players may attempt to select players strategically rather than adhering to the first-come-first-serve norm.

Dennis and Junior were involved in a long and quiet discussion on the sideline involving who they should pick to play next with them. They had quietly informed me that I could play and I knew they were trying to choose the best possible team, ignoring the fact that there were a couple of newcomers at the park who had been waiting to play for some time. When we ultimately walked onto the court, Tony called them out, “Hey guys what the fuck are you doing!?” Pointing at one of the newcomers, “He’s been waiting! You’re just not gonna pick him up? That aint how we play out here!” Dennis and Junior relented quickly and told me I’d have to wait and take the next game. The newcomer walked onto the court to play. After the game Junior made a point to apologize to Tony, claiming that he hadn’t realized the newcomer was waiting.

For Tony, defending the newcomer’s right to participate was rich with moral implications. The game is meant to be open to anybody who has shown sufficient interest in participating.

Together these cases show that the work of organizing players onto teams is itself a meaningful process which anticipates the passage from the world of everyday life into the world of the game. They begin toeing that line, orienting to in-game strategy and skill but not yet fully disattending from who they are to one another away from the park. They think strategically, but do so quietly to avoid the lasting effect and awkwardness of hurt feelings.

In the way they make teams, players avoid two different kinds of errors. Selecting too impersonally through a strict first-come-first-serve requirements would feel rigid and hamper their experience to define themselves in relation to particular others. On the other hand, to choose teams solely based on pre-arranged or pre-made relations would kill the scene’s open and public character. Without entirely thinking it through, talented regulars who might be able to force their way in accept longer waiting times allowing less talented newcomers can play before them. In doing so, they sacrifice their immediate desire to play for the long term vibrancy of the scene. Unknown players would otherwise struggle to find their way onto the court and would be unlikely to come back. In general the way that players navigate the contingencies and challenges of forming teams reflects the collective transformation that is undergone as players prepare to dwell together inside the game.

Individual Reorganization: Matching up

Once teams are agreed upon captains announce the results to inquiring players. The news of the teams begins to circulate across the court as players increasingly express interest in the “squads”. As word spreads players begin to use the teams as a guide toward self-segregating. Players who will participate in the game walk onto the court. They stretch, bounce on the balls of their feet, and get a final drink of water. Those who will not participate make their way to the sideline.

Because players have no uniforms in which to visually differentiate teams once the action is underway they take a moment before the game to focus on the distinction between friend and foe.

I asked Jay what the teams were. He pointed to himself, Clint, me and said “us three.” Then pointed to Steven and Joseph who were standing some ways away from us, “and them two. Come in here”. Steven and Joseph walked to the center of the key where we were standing. Jay opened his arms wide, lightly embracing his adjacent teammates. “Right here. The five of us on the inside versus those five on the outside.”

One team typically stands close to one another under the basket while the other team scatters themselves around the three-point arc. All ten players can then see the distinction between friendly and foe which will define the forthcoming action. Those standing on the “inside” will compete against those on the “outside”. The spatial distinction between inside and outside then loses all salience once teams are mutually acknowledged and understood by all parties.

From the undifferentiated mass of individuals to two teams of five physically separated on the court, the men are nearly ready to enter the gaming universe together. One final rearranging of bodies is necessary before their collective reorganization is complete. Now that players understand themselves clearly as members of a particular team, they go about “matching up” with a particular player on the opposing team. Over the course of the game they will shadow

that player's movements whenever an opponent controls the ball. So they pair off and the 5-on-5 game becomes a collection of 1-on-1 battles. The work of matching up is itself meaningful as players make statements about themselves, their teammates, and their opponents in the way they justify their decisions.

Players know that over the course of the game they will be judged according to how they fare against their assigned opponent. So players take care in selecting their opponent, expressing concern that a particular player may be too big, strong, quick, or skilled for them. On the other hand, this is a moment in which players can express desire to take on a personal challenge.

After one game Luke and I chatted about the player I was guarding. He came alone and nobody seemed to know him but he was an extremely talented and athletic player. "No shame in getting beat there," Luke told me, "he's a tough cover. Can I take a turn on him next game?" I nodded and told him that he could. He continued, "I probably shouldn't with my ankle, but what the fuck. I'll give it a try." A few moments later Luke turned back to me, "You know what? What the fuck am I talking about? You stick with him. You're young and have energy. I'll just play my old man game, run around, and have a good time. You did fine on him. I'm not gonna switch on the off chance that I do 1% better." I laugh and tell him it's fine, that I'll still guard him. He says, "Sometimes I forget that I'm getting older. I used to be prideful and like taking challenges on defense."

The task of matching up can be a moment to reflect on one's own changing relationship to the game. Luke felt torn between his past where taking on challenges was part of the pleasure of the game and his present where he must cope with the fear that his body is not quite up to it. Deciding who to match up with was, in that moment, a decision about the kind of involvement he would have in the forthcoming game. Would he dig in and take on a challenge risking injury, exhaustion, and embarrassment? Or would he commit to a more limited challenge in which he wouldn't need to put so much into the game or so much of himself on the line? The practical question about how to match up became, in that moment, an existential question about the kind of player he was and the kind of player he wanted to be when we stepped back onto the court.

The task of matching up can also create dynamics which continue to play out inside the game. Unlike forming teams, matching up is often done openly in front of one's opponents. Thus, opponents are often aware of the logic and contingencies that informed the decision on how to match up. For instance:

Calvin immediately called out "I got Julio!" Steve said "I dunno if that's such a good idea." Calvin grimaced, clearly frustrated by the implication that Julio would be too good for him. He snapped back "What!?! He didn't get one basket on me last game!" Julio turned away in an exaggerated fashion, grabbed a ball that was bouncing toward him and sank a practice jump shot. He simultaneously barked at Calvin, "Oooohhh that's how it is? Okay! We'll see about that Calvin!" Steve said "Alright Calvin, just don't get lazy on us."

Still not yet inside the game, both Calvin and Julio emerged from this interaction with new motivation to take their match up seriously. Calvin became frustrated that Steve didn't trust him to guard Julio. Meanwhile Julio took notice that Calvin claimed to have stopped him in a previous game. By trying to be strategic about matching up, Steve unwittingly motivated both his teammate and opponent. Once inside the game, the pairing resonated with new significance. When Calvin was lazy to contest one of Julio's shots his teammates criticized his effort despite the fact that the shot did not go in. In this way, disagreements about how to match up can put particular 1-on-1 battles under the microscope both for observers and participants. Occasionally a teammate will suggest in the midst of a game that they switch assigned opponents. This suggestion can be taken as an evaluation of their current performance or a more general statement of their ability and skill.

Matching up also takes on new significance as players do it continuously over the course of weeks, months, and years. Because players generally try to match up with others of approximately equal size, skill, and athleticism many of the men find themselves battling with the same opponents over and over again. One day Fred's team stepped onto the court as the

challenger against my team which had just won the first game of the day. Fred quickly announced to his teammates, "I got Mike!" He walked up to me and slapped my hand and gave me a friendly shove in the chest. He said to me, "How you doing today, Mike? I just want you to know I'm gonna bust your ass today!" I laughed and prodded him, "Oh really? What's different about today than all the other days?" Smirking he told me, "Last time you guarded me you locked me up." I looked at him with surprise and told him I couldn't even remember when we were last matched up. "Trust me dude. I don't forget that shit. Aint happening today!"

Synchronizing the Beginning: Checking in

My analysis of phases of attachment to the scene has now brought players to the precipice of play. They are ready to begin organizing movements across the court for strategic in-game purposes finally disattending completely from one another's biographies and lives away from the park. To organize and synchronize the transition into play many formal sports rely on a non-participating referee to blow a whistle, fire a starting gun, or ring a bell. Pickup players find ways of getting "in" without the help of an outside authority.

For the men at Ocean View Park (and most pickup games across the nation) a ritualized procedure called "checking the ball in" or "checking it up" structures the transition into the game. A player on the offensive team (the "checker") stands between the half-court line and the three-point arc facing his offensive basket with the ball in hand. He passes the ball to the defender assigned to guard him and says "check". The defender catches the ball, takes a moment to look around at his teammates, ensures that they are ready to play, and passes it back to the checker saying "ball in." At that point, everybody knows that the game is on.

Offensive players, however, understand the ritual and often attempt to exploit it. They may begin moving before the defender has actually passed the ball back to the checker,

anticipating the precise moment of play. They cut across the court in order to separate from their defender so they will be available for a pass as soon as the checker has the ball. Realizing what they are up to, the defender may hold onto the ball for a few additional moments, rendering those anticipatory movements meaningless. The offensive players find themselves open only to realize that the defender still has the ball and play has not actually begun.

The checking routine has an adjacency pair structure that resonates with the summons-answer sequence in ordinary conversation. A summons works as a “check” to see whether an interlocutor is available to listen (Schegloff, 1968). If the summoned party is not ready, the summons serves to communicate that their attention is being requested. Answerers respond with phrases such as “What is it?” or “Can I help you?” The summoner is then obligated to go on to the substance of the matter. Similarly, once the checker receives the ball back from his defender, he is obligated to produce a next action within the game framework. To refrain from beginning play after receiving the ball from the defender would be understood as a meaningfully absent action. Play begins out of obligation embedded in the checking ritual.

Wayne held the ball at the top of the key and prepared to check it into play. “Ready fellas?!” He called out across the court. Some of his teammates began cutting as Wayne received the ball back from his opponent. Before he could make a play, however, he noticed Tony walking assertively toward the sideline. “Hold up!” Wayne called out and turned to watch Tony who was walking to where his two small children were scuffling on the sideline. Tony intervened and then, holding their hand, walked them to where he had toys for them to play with at the other end of the court and instructed them to respect one another. When Tony walked back onto the court, Wayne re-engaged the checking ritual and play began once again.

In this case, the players had come to the absolute brink of play before a sideline interruption intervened. Tony’s walking off the court served as an appropriate justification for Wayne to not produce a next move inside the game. Other players, seeing that the interruption would be more than minimally invasive, wandered off the court, got a drink of water, and momentarily sat down

in the shade. When Tony showed himself to be ready once again, Wayne prepared to “check” the ball to him again.

Maintaining the Narrative Arc

Once the checking ritual has put everybody in the interpretive frame of play, the action moves back-and-forth across the court. First one team tries to score on one side of the court and then, whether they fail or succeed, their opponents take a turn to try to score on the opposite basket. These sequences of possessions build toward a coherent gaming narrative. As possessions result in made baskets, players keep track of their building score totals. The first team to 11 points (with the exception of the first and last games of the day which are played to 13) will be declared the winner and so players and spectators alike track the game’s narrative progress by keeping score. If many possessions pass without made baskets, the game feels like it is progressing slowly. If teams score regularly, then the game rushes quickly toward conclusion.

Sustaining this unfolding dialogic form is flush with meaning in its own right. When one team ends their turn by scoring the basketball, there is an expectation that the other team should be able to begin their next possession immediately. But these turn transitions are especially ripe with the potential for tension and emotional turmoil. Dominik, for instance, is known to catch the ball immediately upon laying it into the basket. In doing so he earns himself a moment to revel in his impressive play but also delays his opponents’ next possession and limits their opportunity for a quick counter attack. On a number of occasions his opponents have screamed at him, “Don’t fucking touch it!” They see his actions as having illegitimately extended his previous turn into their next one. A smooth game requires sustaining the progressivity between possessions.

Maintaining forward progress also requires dealing with moments of more extended interruption. Various kinds of events, both within the game and in the surrounding environment, can cause the players to momentarily put the game on pause with every intention of resuming moments later. The most expected sort of interruption is the announcement of a foul or rule violation (See Chapter 5 for an extended discussion). Players can easily make sense of these as a particular kind of interruption in which resolution is forthcoming and resumption immanent.

Other kinds of interruptions can halt the game's progressivity as well. Children occasionally run onto the court and players on the sideline accidentally allow a ball to roll into the playing area. In those cases, players or spectators will call out for the game to come to a stop and gradually the players will slow, look around, and seek a justification for the interruption.

The following case demonstrates another common kind of interruption:

In the middle of the game Julio yelled out "Meter maid! Meter maid!" I looked to the street and spotted a city golf-cart driving up the street toward the meters on Barnard. Momentarily abandoning the game several players sprinted to the sideline, rustled through their bags, and then ran toward the parking meters. I watched Otis run to his car and open the back door as the meter maid approached. He pulled some stuff out and put it back, then stood next to the meter examining it. The meter maid drove on and without feeding the meter, Otis walked back to the court.

Players still on the court watched patiently as Otis and others fed their meters or waited for the threat of the meter maid to pass. They treated the need to feed the meter as a valid side engagement that could momentarily put the game on hold. Even Otis' slightly longer engagement meant to fool the meter maid was given leeway and treated as a sufficient reason for other players to remain ready to play upon his return.

When games are interrupted, the narrative progress is halted and players once again can make inferences about one another's lives and personal characters. They interpret the stoppage and typify it as a particular kind of interruption with its own constitutive "side sequence"

(Jefferson 1972). Then they organize their behavior appropriately- either staying on the court ready to resume play at a moment's notice or casually wander off the court and engage in their own side project. Occasionally during a stoppage a player on the sideline would walk onto the court with a blunt, extending the interruption as several players took a turn with it. These instances could readily be identified as momentary side engagements which would yield quick resumption. Players would stay close to the court and ready to resume as soon as the blunt-holder walked off. The game's unfolding narrative structure is treated as ongoing until otherwise noted. Side engagements are given some leeway but the day's continuation depends on players eventually orienting toward the relevance of resumption. As they resume play, players call out each team's point total as a way of communicating just where in the game's unfolding structure they had put the game on hold. They resume from precisely the point where they left off.

Embracement: Inside the Texture of Play

The game of basketball literally and figuratively consists of two poles on opposite ends of the court. Offense and defense clash on one end and the teams switch roles and clash once again on the opposite end. But while sustaining the back-and-forth sequential structure of play is critical, basketball is a fully embodied sport in which players continuously dwell inside the gaming universe. Unlike board games which are punctuated with regular "off" periods while an opponent takes their turn, basketball players' bodies are continuously in play.

In the way they embody the unfolding action, the two universal roles of offense and defense have more in common than is typically thought. Players on both offense and defense are at play in a field where success is characterized by the work of sustaining a deeply embodied balancing act. On the one hand they work to maintain flexibility and openness in certain situations while on the other they strongly commit themselves to a particular line of action. In

what follows I track my own embodied experience over the course of a sequence of play in order to show the fluctuating senses of freedom, entrapment, openness, and commitment. For clarity I have broken the passage into four smaller segments, dealing analytically with one at a time.

Julio snatched the rebound from mid-air. He quickly turned and we locked eyes. Rather than throwing the ball to my hands he lobbed it out in front of me where it bounced into open space. I sprinted to catch up to it. Momentarily I saw an open path to the basket. With the ball in tow, I ran as fast as I could up the right sideline now marginally slowed by the requirement to dribble.

The ball is precious. When Julio threw it to space in front of me he did so knowing that while the game is “on”, the ball is imbued with a gravitational pull that would yank me toward it. With the ball in my hands, I am hardly the same being. I am given a new burden and a new responsibility which weigh me down. I am expected to protect it from my opponents but unlike other valuable objects in everyday life I have nowhere to hide the ball. I have it, everybody knows it, and my defenders want it back. Perhaps the best way to defend the ball, however, is to go on the offensive- to do something with it and put the defense on the defensive.

When a player first comes into possession of the basketball he has three options: shoot, pass, or dribble. In that moment the court appeared wide open in front of me. I could see the basket in front of me and literally infinite paths to get there. My sense of open space afforded freedom of movement up the court. Momentarily committing myself, I streaked up the sideline in possession of the ball. But while open space presented hope and possibility, the ball also weighed me down due to the requirement to dribble. Bouncing the ball on the ground as one runs across the playing field, dribbling is a qualitatively different style of locomotion. One bounces the ball out in front of them expecting that it will bounce back up and meet their hand several feet in front of the spot where they let go. Regardless of how skilled a player is dribbling is a burden. Caring for the ball is always a distraction from an engagement in pure speed.

I sensed the presence of a defender gaining ground on me from behind. Clint caught me as I neared the basket and I began to feel his body closing the space between us. I lowered my left shoulder and tried to push through him toward the basket. But I felt the strength of his chest resisting and lost some of my forward momentum. Clint towered above me. He had his hands straight up in the air as I crashed into his body. Suddenly any thought of jumping and shooting the ball felt hopeless. I felt stuck under the basket, so close to my goal but nowhere to go.

As I approached the basket Clint was able to catch up to me and I felt the space closing in. My options became more limited as Clint progressively cut off more angles toward the basket. Space continued to tighten as I neared the basket and I felt his body inhibiting my movement. His strength momentarily sapped my energy and forced my realization that laying the ball into the basket would be more difficult than I had thought moments earlier. I was momentarily trapped. In one direction my defender would disabuse me of my responsibility by taking possession of the ball himself. In the other direction I would step out of the playing field and automatically lose possession by rule. What's more, a player is only allowed one continuous series of dribbles. If I was to pick the ball up and touch it with both hands at once I would lose my mobility all together. Colloquial basketball metaphors say that to pick up the ball is to "kill" the dribble creating a "dead" ball. To continue dribbling is to keep one's dribble "alive" in hopes of new outs, new paths, new space, and new freedom.

I heard footsteps coming from behind me and I recognized the voice of my teammate Robbie yelling "Trailer! Trailer!" Without picking up the ball, I performed a "back up dribble." I planted my left foot and exploded backward toward the corner of the court while facing the court's endline. Having backed away from Clint, I squared my shoulders to the basket and saw my newly earned space. Clint was lagging underneath the hoop, opting to shade toward Robbie who was streaking toward the basket.

The "back up dribble" allowed me to keep my dribble "alive" and provided a key turning point in the unfolding sequence. Whereas my paths had been momentarily shut down, by backing up I created space to work with and freed myself yet again. New possibilities then presented themselves. With my teammate Robbie "trailing" the play, Clint could not follow me.

He tried to find some middle ground where he could guard both of us. Now it was he who was stuck between the pull of two opponents. For a moment, he tried not to commit.

I picked up my dribble, grabbing the ball with both hands. Now I had enough space for a relatively easy jump shot and I began to pull the ball up from my waist. Clint saw where this was going. He sprinted toward me yet again, closing the space quickly and leaving Robbie alone under the basket. Not too far into my shooting motion to reverse course, I switched the ball into my left hand and quickly threw it past Clint whose momentum was coming right at me. Robbie caught the ball and casually dropped it in the basket. Clint stood up straight, turned around and yelled at his teammates in dismay, “Is anybody else gonna get back on defense?! Come on guys!”

While the ball altered my locomotion and slowed me down earlier in the sequence, it also gave me new powers. Holding the ball, a player has the thing his opponents want and therefore the power to manipulate their movement. If I move the ball to the right side of my body, my opponents shift with it. If I put it above my head they stand up straight and raise their hands to block its path. If I begin a passing or shooting motion, they respond by lunging or jumping. So long as I control the ball I control the impact and direction of its gravitational pull.

So when I pulled the ball up from my waist, Clint recognized my unfolding commitment to shooting what was a relatively makeable shot. That recognition inspired his commitment. He ran toward me, abandoning Robbie in hopes that he could alter or disrupt my shot. But in fact he found that I was less committed to the shot than he realized. I halted my shooting motion mid-stream, retrospectively transforming my shot-in-the-making into a “fake”. Now Clint was *overcommitted*. Changing my release point faster than Clint could adjust, I snapped a pass to Robbie who stood alone under the basket. He made an even easier shot than the one Clint had hoped to disrupt.

In truth, Clint was in a bad situation. Like a tic-tac-toe player facing two paths to defeat, Clint was forced to commit one way and leave an alternative path wide open. His frustration at the end of the passage reflects his understanding that without help from a teammate, two

offensive players can often find an open path against a single defender. But unlike tic-tac-toe there are no guarantees in basketball. Players miss shots, muff passes, hesitate for a moment too long, and in a variety of other ways fail to find the right balance between commitment and opening alternative paths. Offensive players can also be frustrated by teammates who, coming too close to them, “clog” their ability to find freedom in space.

These continuous, competitive, and embodied movements across the court characterize players in full “embrace” of the basketball universe. There is no more role distance here as they are at one with their basketball self. The game presents a thickness and texture of involvement that is distinct from light hearted moments of anticipation or the collective significance of team formation. Now they are physically “into” the universe of significance which drew them to the park in the first place.

Emphatic Moments: “And one!”

The dialectic balance between committing to one line of action while staying open to emergent possibilities characterizes some of the most dramatic and emotionally salient moments during the game. One such moment is the “and one”. In formal refereed basketball games special significance is given to the situation in which a player successfully shoots the ball through the hoop while simultaneously absorbing illegal contact from a defender. In that situation, the offensive player is awarded the points for the basket “*and one*” free throw- an unguarded shot worth one additional point if successful.

In the heat of action the phrase “and one!” means much more than is reflected by the scoreboard, however. On the pickup court no free throws are awarded. A basket made in spite of a foul counts just the same as any other basket. And yet, players yell “and one!” passionately.

It is a moment that has rich emotional appeal and significance for the men who play. Consider the following example:

Dominik intercepted a pass near the half-court line and with no defenders in his path he sprinted toward the opposite basket. Matt, one of his opponents, ran to catch up to him. Dominik leaped into the air and Matt jumped simultaneously to block the shot. Matt's hand made a loud smacking sound across Dominik's shooting arm just above his elbow. Still, Dominik managed to flip the ball off the backboard and into the basket. Dominik landed, paused for a moment, clinched his fists and screamed "AND ONE!" As he ran back on defense he continued, "And one nigga! And one!" Matt grimaced and shook his head in displeasure. He snapped back, "Shut up nigga! I aint giving you anything easy out here. That was some lucky shit anyways!"

The emotions that bubbled up during this moment emerged in part out of a history of contentious interactions between Matt and Dominik (documented in chapter 3). But that can't be the whole story. Something in the "and one" moment consistently sparks heightened passion at the park.

Like my example with Clint above, Dominik initially saw a wide open path to the basket and ran with the ball toward an apparently easy shot. Unlike my case, however, Dominik remained strongly committed to scoring the basket directly without slowing down, backing up, or utilizing a teammate. Running full speed he leaped and tried to score at all costs. Sensing Matt was approaching to challenge the shot Dominik put everything on the line to try to finish the play at the rim. At some point in his approach to the basket he was so committed that he passed a point of no return.

Matt for his part was similarly committed. He sprinted back to his defensive basket in an attempt to challenge Dominik's shot and maintained his commitment to that line of action to the bitter end. Like Dominik, he leaped and extended his arm with all his energy. If he could get his hand on the ball and knock it harmlessly away from the rim he'd show Dominik to have been overzealous, single minded, and bullheaded. So as they leaped together Dominik extended the ball toward the rim while Matt extended his arm in hopes of stopping the ball mid-stream. Both

were fully committed to their respective lines and only one could emerge victorious. This, as Goffman would say, was a moment of great “action” as both parties had fully committed themselves (Goffman 1967). Though the outcome was not yet known, all those present could see that we would momentarily find out who was “right” and who was “wrong” to put so much on the line.

When Dominik emerged victorious the “and one” character of the moment resonated with his own double victory and corresponding double loss for Matt. The loud slapping noise on Dominik’s arm served as audible proof that Matt had come into illegal contact with him at the moment of heightened significance. Everybody knew it. So not only did Matt fail to stop Dominik from scoring, but he failed despite having been physically overcommitted. Meanwhile, Dominik’s experience of victory was heightened by the fact that he scored in spite of Matt’s overcommitment. Dominik induced an over commitment to self and scored anyways. His own ego-victory and the ego-loss for Matt are added onto the in-game practical consequences of a made basket.

Afterward they both did work to either reduce or enhance the ego-implications of the moment. Matt explained his action as having emerged from a coherent strategy: to never give an opponent an easy basket even if that means he must risk embarrassment. And he disparaged the basket further as the product of “luck” rather than skill or power. He sought to dilute the existential loss to self. Dominik on the other hand reveled in the moment. He flexed his muscles to celebrate and screamed “and one!” staring directly at Matt, explicitly stating the ego implications of the play. Later that day I gave Dominik a ride back to his apartment. Out of the public sphere he laughed at Matt’s frustration with him. “Give me a break,” he said, “That nigga would have been talking so much shit if he got an ‘and one’ on me like that!”

The power and seduction of the “and one” basket should serve as a reminder that while the game counts all baskets the same, they can have very different existential significance. For example, if my defender is entirely uncommitted and uninterested in stopping my shot-attempt, the made shot means significantly less. Or if my defender commits himself elsewhere on the court and leaves me open to shoot, the made basket resonates powerfully throughout my teammates who recognized that my defender was out of position and directly facilitated my shot attempt. Or if my defender fully commits to stopping me and I score despite his best effort my experience is heightened. But the “and one” points to the moment where alter is not only committed to stopping me, but through speed, power, or deception I induce his over commitment. Despite his crossing the line between legal and illegal contact I score anyways. In that moment my defender is twice the dupe and I am doubly empowered. The “and” in “and one” is not merely about the additional free-throw in formal basketball games but points to the additional self-reflective meaning which is added onto the achievement as it is signified on the scoreboard.

Collective Detachment and Exit

A day of basketball at Ocean View Park is punctuated by sequences of games inside of which dramatic and embodied tensions play out. Winning teams continue to embrace their basketball selves in each next game while losing teams step off, turn into spectators, and contemplate whether they want to wait for their next turn or call it a day. As each next game comes to an end, players are increasingly likely to call it a day. If enough late arrivals come to the park momentum for continued play can be sustained for several hours. But at some point the tides eventually turn. Fresh players stop arriving at the park and tired players begin to call it a

day, gathering their things, bidding farewell, and walking away. Just as players generally arrive alone, they tend to leave the park alone as well. And they do so in patterned ways.

Departures are almost always initiated from outside of the game rather than in the midst of the action. Players who begin games are expected to finish. Further, most players try to play in at least two games over the course of the day. If they leave after a single game others are likely to inquire as to why they are “one and done”. While two games is often the minimum, it’s not unusual for players to play in five or six games and then gloat about how great the “run” was. Typically this occurs because their team won a series of games over the course of the day earning the right to stay on the court. Players on winning teams are often pressured to stay at the park to ride the wave of success for as long as possible. When a player leaves in the midst of a game, after a single game, or after their team’s victory, they leave themselves open to inquiry and some kind of account is typically expected. Stories about an injury or an obligation to work or family are respected as legitimate ways for others to make sense of a departure that is otherwise “premature”.

As the day progresses, departure becomes increasingly relevant for players on a losing team. At that point, everybody is aware of the calculation: is it worth the wait to play again? While players who lose in the first game of the day will generally stick around and re-enter the queue, as the day wears on players on losing teams become increasingly likely to make the opposite decision and bid farewell. Some players will take off their shoes, revealing their plans to be done for the day even while they watch the ongoing action. The crowd of spectators forming “next” teams in the queue inevitably begins to dwindle.

The thinning sideline crowd changes the gaming context for the men on the court. Knowing that nobody on the sideline is waiting to take their place, the players on the court

sometimes define the current game as the last game of the day. Especially if a player knows he has to leave after the game the empty sideline makes relevant the announcement of his plans, “Sorry guys I gotta go after this. Better make this game to 13.” Changing the required score total to 13 defines the ongoing game as the day’s finale. But the players on the court may also try to get a commitment from everybody to “run it back.” That is, to finish the current game and immediately play one more afterward.

Noting the empty sideline in the middle of a game, Tony announced, “Come on ya’ll let’s go to 11 and then run it right back.” Everybody agreed and we played two consecutive games, the second of which we played to 13.

So from within the game, players begin to respond to the fizzling crowd on the sideline and consider just how long they can go. Once the day’s conclusion is thematized, they either opt to extend the day toward a definitive end point or define it as nearly over. Sometimes, however, plans to play another game are undone after the fact.

Although it was late in the day everybody was still playing hard. The sideline, however, was beginning to thin out as players left the park. Noticing this, Craig waved toward the sideline and called out, “Hey anybody got next!?” Justin shouted, “Yeah somebody will play, common let’s go to 11 and run another one!” Craig said that if we had enough players he’d be glad to run another. Jeff pushed even further, suggesting we go to 13 *and* play another one after that. Eventually it was suggested that we play to 13 and then play another one if possible. When the game was over, however, Joel checked his phone and announced that he needed to go. With nobody left on the sideline to take his place everybody began taking their shoes off and preparing to leave the park.

When Justin answered Craig’s question on behalf of the players on the sideline, he was doing the work of trying to extend the day of basketball. If he was right that players on the sideline wanted to play another one, the likelihood of having ten players in a next game was significantly increased. If, however, all the players on the sideline were done for the day, every single player currently on the court would need to come back in order to play another game.

Though we did not end up playing an additional game, Justin's strategy was not entirely ineffective. Sustaining the belief that there will be another game also sustains the motivation for players on the court to take the current game seriously. Once a game is defined as the last game of the day some of the motivation to play hard is lost. Role distance is re-introduced inside the game itself as players begin goofing off, attempting wild trick shots, interrupting the game with fits of laughter, and putting in only modest effort. When players on the court begin to treat the game in this way, those on the sideline are likely to see it as the last game of the day even if it hasn't been defined as such. They often figure that it probably isn't worth it to stick around to play in a game that has taken on such a silly air. Knowing that others are trying to determine whether there is likely to be another game, players on the court encourage one another to play seriously.

Having lost the last game, a few players began leaving the sideline and walking toward the parking lot with their things. We were in the midst of the 4th game of the day. I could tell players were beginning to tire, taking a long time to chase after the ball when it rolled away from the court. Justin appeared especially tired, failing to run hard on defense on a couple consecutive plays. He was dribbling the ball up the court and attempted a fancy behind the back dribble laughing at his own show boating. Dennis quickly sanctioned him, "You better stop all that shit or we for sure ain't gonna get another game in! This will be the last game real quick!"

Dennis saw in Justin's style of play the kind of move that would indicate to others the day's forthcoming conclusion. In order to sustain momentum for the day and create the possibility for more games after the current one, he reminded Justin to take this game more seriously. He encouraged a quality of involvement characteristic of the middle of the day rather than the end. Extending the day of basketball depends exactly on players treating the game as if it has a significant future.

While the majority of days fizzle to conclusion as players lose energy and the scene loses momentum, individual players occasionally make more dramatic departures.

Justin and Jeff had played on the same team for the majority of the day and had been constantly griping at each other. Justin would berate him for his play and between games Jeff approached me and expressed his frustration, “Fuck J dude. He comes out here, doesn’t play any defense and just talks shit. I’m fucking sick of him.” In the next game Jeff’s frustration boiled over in public. Players had begun to play loosely, characteristic of the end of the day. They were lazy about getting back on defense and the play was increasingly sloppy. I was ready to check the ball in to Jeff, standing under the basket, revealed his apparent confusion about who he was supposed to be guarding.

Justin yelled at him, “Jeff for real! Who are you guarding dude? You have no idea what’s going on!” Jeff snapped back and pointed at Luke’s chest, “I’ve got Luke!” Justin and Luke immediately yelled back that Luke was on their team. Jeff snapped back, “Well fuck. Who do I have!?” As soon as it became clear that Jeff had been trying to guard his own teammate Matt fell down onto his back laughing. He laid there on the court, face to the sky for about a minute laughing and expressing disbelief at Jeff’s confusion.

Jeff tried to put the mistake quickly behind him. He said seriously, “Okay I got Mike!” and walked toward me in an attempt to begin the next possession. But Justin wasn’t going to let it go. He walked toward the sideline with his hands to the sky in exasperation, “Come on man, this whole time you didn’t know who you were guarding!?! We’ve played two fucking games and you’re confused?! Wow. Have you been guarding the wrong guy this entire fucking time!” Others chuckled quietly and Matt remained on his back laughing. I could see Jeff’s anger boiling over. Holding the ball with one hand he turned toward where Justin who was standing under the south basket. He drop kicked the ball high into the air onto the park’s grassy lawn. Tomás called out “Okay, I think that’s it. Game over.” Luke said the same thing, “yeah game over.” Without fetching the ball, Jeff gathered his things and quickly left the park.

These kinds of situations are rare. Even when one player leaves the park in a fury, there are typically other players on the sideline ready to jump in and take his place. But in this case the entire day was already losing steam and the remaining players on the sideline appeared uninterested in jumping into the action. Jeff’s dramatic departure served as a catalyst for everybody else to call it a day. Given that the ball had rolled some distance from the court, resuming play would take some extra time, and the suggestion to end the day made sense.

With Jeff gone, conversation after the game quickly turned to his immaturity. Justin compared him to a cartoon character and Matt laughed at the “dumb shit” that he sometimes does. Luke, however, didn’t place the blame solely on Jeff. He called out, “Justin you’re the worst team sports player I’ve ever known. You’re a great player, but a terrible teammate!”

When Luke left, however, he too was criticized. Tomás explained that Luke had been frustrated that he wasn't receiving the ball enough. Tomás said, "Then I passed him the ball and he was like, 'It's too late now! Pass it earlier!' I swear he's like a girl who's all, 'It's too late to ask me out now. I like you but you missed your opportunity.'" We all laughed at this characterization of Luke's pettiness.

While the day ended in a relatively dramatic way, the ribbing remained lighthearted. A week or so later Matt told me that Jeff had apologized to him for kicking the ball and leaving the park in a hurry. While people remember that Jeff has a penchant for temper tantrums, nobody has ever talked about this particular incident again. This case demonstrates, however, that ending a day of basketball can have dramatic character implications.

Together these cases show how players accomplish the collective detachment from the game. Regardless of their efforts to sustain the momentum of serious play, the whole scene gradually loses the collective wind in its sail. Players on the sideline decide it isn't worth it to wait for another game, taking away some of the motivation for players on the court to take the current game seriously, and further encouraging others on the sideline to call it a day. Though dramatic events can crash the day into a premature conclusion, typically the need to finish a game keeps at least 10 players at the park until it is clear that another game will not be played. At that point a few stragglers hang out, smoke a final blunt, or talk about a place to get lunch or their plans for the upcoming night. Most players gather their things, change back and into everyday shoes, and bid one another farewell.

Conclusion

The above analysis has tracked the phases of attachment which characterize the way individual players relate to the collective social scene over the course of the day. I have shown

how their mornings are organized in anticipation of play and the people they are likely to see. Gradually, however, they get themselves closer to the precipice of deeply seductive and embodied attachment to game's universe of significance. The closer they get the more they begin to focus on in-game contingencies and disattend from who they are to one another outside the game. They become deeply "involved" in the texture of the activity, occupy and dwell in the game together, and create collective tension that provides opportunities for vivid displays of power, dominance, and intellect. At its best, the experience of play affords the players a sense that like a hand in a glove, they fit seamlessly in the world.

When this works well and players have fun at the park they gradually transform the context in which they make the decision to participate in future days of basketball at the park. Howard Becker's formulation of an individual's "commitment" to a particular line of activity is instructive by comparison (Becker 1960). In Becker's account, individuals often commit themselves to consistent lines of behavior through one or more "side bets". Actions or interests which were originally thought to be extraneous to the situation at hand propel consistency going forward by making inconsistency especially costly. For instance, having developed a smooth work routine, invested in community organizations, and settled into a new home, changing jobs may be especially costly even when it comes with a salary and status increase.

But commitment to a particular line of activity need not always require heavy external or monetary investments. Often through ordinary rounds of activity individuals commit themselves through a series of actions, no one of which induces commitment on its own. This, Becker says, is "commitment by default" (Becker 1960:38). By seeing the unfolding attachment that an individual has to the scene at OVP over the course of a day, we may come to see why he would choose to come back and play again in the future.

When players become known at Ocean View Park, they become increasingly comfortable with the scene. They need not make clear that they intend to play or go through much effort to secure a spot on the team. They need not prove themselves over again as basketball players, as people, and as valued participants. And so their path toward participation is smoothed. Other basketball courts may come to feel that they charge an increasingly high price of admission and Ocean View Park becomes increasingly attractive by comparison. In this way, the entire process of participation generates a collective momentum through which the fragile scene is held together.

Chapter 5

Basketball in the Key of Law: The significance of disputing

I now turn to a final contingency for the continued vibrancy of the scene that was only given passing concern in the previous chapter. As with bringing enough players to the park, forming teams, starting, stopping, and resuming play, and ending the day of basketball together, enforcing the rules of the game must be accomplished by the players themselves without the help of an outside authority. In this chapter I show how the work of enforcing and defending the rules of the game is an ongoing interactional accomplishment that is critical to sustaining a fragile and improvisational form of park use.

In the early 1960s Harold Garfinkel famously undermined what had become the orthodox sociological account of the relationship between social norms and order. He did so in part by running “breaching experiments” on the game of tic-tac-toe. He would have a student experimenter erase the mark made by the opponent and move it to a different cell before making a move of his or her own. The reactions to this procedure varied. Some opponents were furious that the experimenter had challenged them to a game and then proceeded to cheat. Others simply reinterpreted what was going on. They came to sense that they were not playing tic-tac-toe after all but a variation of the game with slightly different rules (Garfinkel 1963; see also Heritage 1998). While Garfinkel took this finding and deeply unsettled the sociological status quo, it should also be seen as making a basic point about the relationship between games and their rules. Processes which enforce the rules do not merely regulate the game, they bring it into being in the first place. When the rules of tic-tac-toe (or any other game) are ignored, the activity fails to be the game at all.²¹ Rules constitute the activity in that they are constantly used not only to

²¹ Many legal scholars have made similar observations about the relationship between law and society. Law does not merely regulate society but gives it sense. As Geertz noted, law is not “a mere technical add-on to a morally or

regulate action but to guide interpretations and orient participant to possibilities for action within the gaming universe.

But rules cannot do any of this important work on their own. In practice it is up to social actors in concrete situations to decide just how much the rules can bend before the game disintegrates into some other version of itself. For example, children's leagues commonly change the "official rules" of the game as set out by professional leagues in order to make them more fun for younger participants. Children play with smaller balls, lower rims, and shorter distances. Referees also tend to give beginners leeway on some of the more complex rules which would be difficult for them to follow. Adhering to the letter of the law might mandate that they blow their whistle every couple of seconds. And so they take a more relaxed approach. Similarly, it would seem entirely out of place for a young romantic couple to involve themselves in a vigorous dispute over a dribbling technicality during a lighthearted basketball "shoot around". The point is that the relationship participants sustain to the rules and rule enforcement is constitutive of much of the gaming encounter's character, quality, and significance.

In this chapter I show how basketball players at OVP manage and find a balance in their relationship to the rules of the game. The letter of the law would be unsatisfying to many players but too loose a relationship to the rules and the activity would fail to qualify as basketball all together. They negotiate this tension in concrete situations of play because without referees it is up to them to sustain their activity as a "real game of basketball" on each trip to the park.

The Key of Law and Significance of Disputing

Basketball games at Ocean View Park are riddled with volatile and lengthy disputes. The majority of games are interrupted at least four or five times with disagreements over a foul call, a

immorally) finished society," but rather is an "active part of it" (Geertz 1983:218). See also (Ewick and Silbey 1998; Sarat and Kearns 1993). This sensibility has a long history in socio-legal literature dating back to early studies of dispute processes (Gulliver 1963; Llewellyn and Hoebel 1941) and legal philosophy (Fuller 1963; Hart 1961).

rule violation, or the score count. Occasionally games take on such a litigious quality that players on the sideline begin groaning that the arguing is extending their waiting period. While disputing is a relatively expected part of the basketball experience at OVP, we must recognize that it is entirely possible to play informal games of basketball without much disputing at all. Disputing, however, transforms the character, meaning, and significance of the game.

Erving Goffman's concept of "keying" is a useful starting place for understanding the role of disputes in transforming the significance of the activity (Goffman 1974:40–82). Goffman developed the concept to describe how the "same action" takes on new meaning if performed in qualitatively different ways – that is, in different "keys."²² A punch to the shoulder can easily be understood as part of a boxing match if the two parties are wearing boxing trunks and standing inside a boxing ring. In other contexts, however, a punch to the shoulder is done as part of a greeting sequence. Or it can be done as part of a theatrical play in which two characters are boxing. Or it can be done as part of a rehearsal for that play. In each case, the punch is produced in a different "key" and has a qualitatively different relationship to a "real punch".

Similarly, a game of basketball can mean a variety of things and have different relationships to a "real game". It can be played as part of a practice, a try-out, a flirtatious date, a silly interaction between parent and child, a cardiovascular workout, a professional championship, a flashy show,²³ and so on. In each situation, the meaning is constituted as participants "key" their behavior to sustain the game's particular and specific meaning.

The relationship that players maintain with rules and rule violations is a crucial arena for defining what kind of game is being played. As noted, for an adult to argue over a foul call with

²² The term is a rough musical metaphor. The "same song" can feel quite different when played in a different key.

²³ In his recent ethnography of basketball in Philadelphia Scott Brooks (2009) shows informal playground games being played with an explicit interest in being noticed and performing well for onlookers. Both peers and coaches provide an important audience for fancy moves and effective play.

a child would contribute a set of meanings to the situation that most would experience as bizarre or unsettling. For players interested in a cardiovascular workout, an extended argument might defeat the whole purpose of the game by allowing heart rates to drop. But in the games at OVP which I characterize as being played in the “key of law” arguments are both common and expected.

Organizing behavior in the key of law is instrumental in resisting competing definitions of the basketball games. The informality of the affair opens up the possibility that the biggest, the strongest, the most talented, or the most popular players would simply have their way. Though such players may occasionally hold more sway, it is essential for all parties to resist that the implications of that potential. Just as it’s not fun for losing teams to feel they were robbed, it’s not fun for the winning team to have the legitimacy of their victory questioned. The pleasure of the experience is contingent on collective agreement that the games are basically fair.

But in resisting the perception that the games are unjust and biased players simultaneously constitute the game as meaningful in another sense. Taking the possibility of injustice seriously, players resist that idea that the games are “just for fun” and that they are “just playing around.” In formal basketball leagues, the entrance fee, the scoreboard, and the recording of wins and losses generate a sense that the games count for something. On the playground court players must find alternative ways of ensuring that they are not doing something so childish or frivolous as “mere play”.²⁴ Disputing gives the game a solid accent of reality.

²⁴ Lee’s (2009) study of battle rappers demonstrates the reverse problem faced by pickup basketball players. By doling out vicious insults, battle rappers risk being understood as “really meaning it” and participants must cue each other that it’s all just play. Pickup basketball players are faced with the problem that their activity may be understood as “just a game”.

My descriptions of disputing practices at OVP are organized in a natural history framework. I begin before the emergence of trouble or rule violations as players fully engross themselves in the unfolding action and organize their perception around the constant possibility of rule infractions. I then track a variety of practices as players call violations, contest those calls, and ultimately give up and resume play. Each phase of the natural history is organized in the key of law.

Perceiving

In *Frame Analysis*, Goffman worked in the pragmatist and phenomenological traditions which appreciate that perception is not a matter of being passively impressed upon by external stimuli. Rather, we actively organize our perception in reference to practical projects which frame the meaning we give the world around us. “Mere perceiving,” Goffman noted, “is a much more active penetration into the world than at first might be thought” (Goffman 1974:38).

Pickup basketball players organize their perception of the unfolding action by using their understanding of the game to see typical basketball-relevant events. That is, the game provides a frame inside which they understand one another’s actions. When a player runs across the court, others see him as running toward a strategic position. Unless they identify something which changes the definition of the situation, they cannot and will not see the player as running toward the ocean even if he is momentarily running in that direction. They see movements as part of gestalt configurations which implicate likely next sequences of moves within the game. Just as Eric Livingston (2006) showed in the context of checkers, expert basketball players can see more strategic possibilities than can novices.

Compared to refereed games, players in pickup games must organize their perception around an additional task. Not only must they monitor the game with an eye toward strategy,

they must also be looking for rule violations. This is no small challenge. While referees are free to move to strategic vantage points in order to see various kinds of violations, pickup players must look for violations from the vantage point of players. From within the action they are at a decided disadvantage for seeing potential violations.

One day a sideline spectator told Wayne that his opponent had just committed a traveling violation. Wayne snapped back at the spectator, “I know [that he travelled] but I can’t watch for that! I’m playing ‘D’ [defense] and you know this boy has some shit in his arsenal!” Wayne recognized the serious challenge of simultaneously shadowing a skilled opponent’s movement and monitoring that movement for rule violations.

Pickup players could respond to this perceptual challenge in a number of ways. They could, for example, always give their opponent the benefit of the doubt and rely entirely on the good faith of others to fess up when they break a rule. Players would need not concern themselves with violations and could focus their perceptual energies entirely on game strategy. At OVP this is rarely the case. In playing the game in the key of law players develop strategies for looking at the action from within to pick out rule violations as they happen. But rule violations do not present themselves as such. Sequences of play must be perceived, understood, and constituted as cases of a particular type of infraction.

A very common strategy is to maintain a constant level of embodied self-reflexivity (Pagis 2009). Especially when they possess the ball, players stay alive to the various forms of contact they absorb. If they jump to shoot the ball, opponents typically tune their perception into the release point above the shooter’s head. But the shooter himself stays alive to contact he absorbs through his hips or torso. While some opponents may insist that there was no illegal contact on the shot, the shooter can simply respond that he was fouled “on the body” where

nobody else was looking. Little grabs, bumps, hip checks, and wrist slaps are all possible sources of foul calls which are routinely attended to in sustaining the key of law.

Another strategy is to watch an opponent's behavior not for its current rule violating status but as part of an unfolding action sequence which projects a forthcoming rule violation. For example, Wayne saw his opponent's actions as constituting a possible violation in the making:

Jesse ran down the court to play offense. He approached Wayne and, while facing him, began to slow down in order to block Wayne's path and prevent him from playing effective defense. As Jesse moved toward him, Wayne yelled out "Don't move on that screen! Don't move! Don't move!" As Wayne pushed past Jesse's body he called a foul. "I was telling him the whole time not to move, and then he tried to head hunt me. That's going this way!" He pointed in his team's offensive direction to indicate it should be his team's possession.

As Jesse moved down the court, Wayne's announcement showed that he was watching Jesse's movement for possible rule violations. He identified Jesse's movement as projecting a sanctionable event- a "screen". Wayne constructed the action as a case-in-the-making by reading the prospective "horizon" of action (Goodwin 1994).²⁵ He read Jesse's movement as "starting to" do something illegal even if he hadn't done it yet.

In his announcement Wayne provided a cease-and-desist order. He communicated to Jesse and to others that Jesse's course of action was unacceptable. Jesse was given an opportunity to alter his behavior and produce a refined, respectful, and rule-governed screen. When Jesse continued his trajectory Wayne called the foul and described Jesse as having tried to "head hunt," an allusion to the viciousness of Jesse's play. Both the violation itself and the

²⁵ Goodwin showed how this perceptual practice operated in the landmark Rodney King trial. The defense argued that jurors needed to learn to see the video evidence as police officers were trained to see it in order to understand why the officers delivered such brutal blows to an apparently innocent victim. The officers' "professional vision" demanded reading what King was "starting to" do with each painful, twisting response to a baton blow.

alleged violence of the play were constituted through Wayne' ability to organize his perception of the unfolding play as a legal case-in-the-making.

Pickup players don't merely see cases one at a time, however. Their perception of unfolding action is informed by recent incidents. Players may see forthcoming action as another case of the same type of violation which was recently identified. This perceptual work is made even easier when a single player develops a reputation for committing or calling the same kind of violation over and over again. Otis, for example, frustrated his opponents one day by continually calling fouls as he attempted wild, out of control, and un-makeable shots. His opponents became angry and called him a "hack" for leaning too heavily on foul calls when he had no chance of scoring. In one play, Otis's opponent Tyler correctly anticipated another instance. As Otis sprinted toward the basket with the ball Tyler yelled out, "here comes another foul!" When Otis called a foul a spectator and I burst out laughing at the accuracy of Tyler's prediction. Tyler turned to us and commented, "For real. It's so fucking obvious!"

Tyler's use of the previous play to guide his perception allowed him to see an unfolding instance of the same kind of case and he identified the likely violation before it actually happened. While he was not involved in the play itself, the point here is that he used his knowledge of previous plays to inform his seeing the play in progress. The reasoning by analogy that is fundamental to law informs the very perception and comprehension of unfolding action on the pickup basketball court.

Another perceptual strategy is to see how certain movements and actions are so closely associated with a particular violation that they might as well serve as visual evidence for the violation itself. In the case of the traveling violation, players often make the call because the player with the ball made an "awkward" movement that just "didn't look right". On one play

Otis saw a different aspect of my movement which implicated a traveling violation: “You think you went from full speed to a complete stop without sliding your feet? You’re crazy!” What Otis actually claims to have seen was a movement (coming to a quick stop) that would be very difficult to perform without violating the traveling rule. He didn’t see my feet actually move, nor did he need to in order to justify having witnessed the violation first hand.

Perceiving the game in the key of law requires a disciplined engagement with the unfolding action. Players separate cases out of the flow of the action by using both rules and recent situations to guide their perception of the game. While perceiving the game in this way is essential to generating disputes, doing so does not imply that players want to enforce the letter of the law on every possible occasion. For instance, in a game that had already been interrupted by numerous travelling violations Fred called yet another violation when he saw my teammate Tom shuffle his feet:

Immediately after calling the travelling violation on Tom, Fred waved off the call and announced that Tom’s team could keep the ball and re-start their possession. Fred’s teammates were not so generous and wanted to enforce the rule and take possession of the ball. While his teammates argued the point Fred turned to me and said, “Yo it wasn’t even so much of a call as a comment. I was commenting on the play. It’s like when you’re watching a basketball game on TV and a dude shuffles his feet, what do you say?” I smiled and agreed, “yeah, you say ‘travel!’” He continued, “Right. It’s instinctive. You just say it. I didn’t want to call it, I really didn’t. But I couldn’t help myself.”

Fred experienced his own call as a nearly unconscious reflex. The practice of seeing the game in the key of law carried him into making the call in spite of his better judgment moments later. The violation hadn’t given Tom much strategic advantage and Fred didn’t want to be a stickler for the rules, but his impulse was to announce the violation that he witnessed. To articulate this, Fred drew on his experience of watching basketball on TV where spectators are free to comment on violations without anticipating that their comments will impact the game itself. Fred’s call

was not the product of a rational desire to enforce the rule, but rather emerged naturally from his disciplined and rigorous perceptual engagement with the action.

The point is that perceiving in the key of law is a qualitatively unique way of looking at the action that creates and sustains players' serious engrossment in the game. Because they are at the disadvantage of monitoring the rule governed activity from within, they develop perceptual strategies which parse the action in reference to the rules and other recent cases. But it doesn't follow automatically from this way of looking that the games take on an overwhelming litigious tone. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition for playing basketball in the key of law. Litigiousness is sustained as players call violations, dispute over them, and resolve disagreements.

Calling Violations

All games require the identification of rule violations. If this task is not sufficiently performed the players may sense that they are no longer playing the game they set out to play. Goffman (1974:81) noted that in competitive sports it is the job of referees to ensure that players don't make a game of the game by treating it un-seriously. If too many violations go unannounced, players may find themselves engaging in an ironic or silly game rather than one that feels serious and "real".

Without referees to do this for them, pickup players must publicize violations themselves. At OVP, the relevance and necessity of announcing rule violations is taken for granted. The key of law is sustained by seeing unannounced violations not as evidence of a silly or ironic game, but as evidence of injustice and victimizing. Thus, teammates criticize one another for not calling violations that they perceive as warranted. It is presumed that the opponent would

enforce the rule in precisely the same situation. Each team typically operates with the assumption that unless announced, there has been no violation.

One day there was a new player at the park. He arrived and left by himself and nobody seemed to know who he was. He was offered a spot on a team and played in several games over the course of the day. In one game Otis smacked the ball out of his hands. The ball bounced off the newcomer's leg and trickled out of bounds. Otis quickly yelled "That's our ball! We're going this way!" as he pointed in his team's offensive direction. The newcomer snapped back that it was an obvious foul because Otis had slammed into his body. Otis quickly relented, "I'll give you the foul dude. You didn't call shit though and it touched you last. You gotta call your fouls out here because nobody's just gonna give them to you." Julio, one of the newcomer's teammates delivered the same message in a more supportive tone, "Just call your fouls out here man. Just call 'em."

Though Otis was prepared to admit that he had committed a foul, he was not going to volunteer the information. It was only once the newcomer actually made the call that Otis relented. In fact, Otis was exasperated that the newcomer would be frustrated with him. For Otis it went without saying that he would not call a foul on himself. In fact, players are regularly sanctioned by teammates when they announce that they violated a rule before their opponent announces it himself. When Doc raised his hand and announced that he had bumped into Jeff and fouled him, his teammates were displeased. One yelled at him to "let Jeff call his own fouls!" Jeff retrospectively agreed with Doc's admission of guilt but it's impossible to know whether Jeff would have made the call on his own volition. So at OVP players are criticized for failing to call a warranted foul *and* for calling a warranted foul on oneself. Upholding these expectations is a vital part of sustaining the legalistic and adversarial quality of play.²⁶

While foul calls announce a certain kind of trouble, players do not always respond to them as problematic. In many cases players quickly agree with the announcement and move to resume play immediately. But in the way they call fouls players necessarily present some

²⁶ Robert Kagan (2001) characterized the American way of law as "adversarial legalism". The adversarial element refers to the absence of powerful third parties leaving disputants to invoke legality themselves. Pickup players sustain this stance when they insist that there is no foul without a call.

interpretation of the kind of foul it was. Those interpretations, rather than the foul itself, can easily become the center of disagreement. Goffman refers to these interpretive disputes as “ordinary trouble” (Goffman 1974:304). For example, a foul call can be used as an opportunity to “call out” a specific opponent or an entire team for their wrong doing.

Matt faked like he was going to go up for a shot and his defender, Jeff, jumped high into the air. As Jeff landed he wrapped his arms around Matt to blatantly prevent him from attempting a shot. Matt yelled, “Can I get a shot off!? Goddman!” He tried to force the ball up toward the basket despite the fact that Jeff was holding him down. When he failed to score, he aggressively screamed that he was constantly being “hacked” during his shot attempts throughout the day. Jeff’s teammate Tony expressed frustration that Matt was making such a big deal out of this play. Tony yelled, “Everybody out here gets fouled sometimes. I get slapped in the face. Why do you have to say shit!? Just call your goddamn fouls!”

In calling the foul on Jeff, Matt registered a complaint that this foul exceeded an ordinary level of physicality. He claimed that Jeff’s foul not only violating the rules of basketball but imposed on his experience in a more profound way. If Matt’s opponents hack him on every shot attempt, then what’s the point of playing?

Through his frustrated tone and situating this foul as part of a larger series of morally problematic cases, Matt suggested that this was not a “normal foul”. Tony resisted that interpretation. He saw Jeff’s foul as not so atypical that it warranted such an angry response. For Tony, the foul was “just a foul” and was not unlike the kind of contact that everybody tolerates as part of typical games of basketball. The important point here is that both players oriented to the distinction between foul calls which register “normal fouls” and those which register more serious trouble. The following instance presents a similar dynamic:

Otis chased after the ball and in the process ran into Jesse who stumbled from the contact. Jesse called a foul and was upset by Otis’s physicality. He shoved Otis in the chest and said, “What the heck man! What do you have against me anyways?!” Otis smiled and as he skipped backward to play defense taunted, “I’m going for the ball homie. It’s just about the rock [the ball]. I don’t have any fucking clue who you are, nor do I care. It’s all about the rock!”

Like the previous case, Jesse's foul call registered a complaint beyond the mere violation of rules. Jesse claimed that the foul was not only atypical, but was indicative of how Otis related to him as an individual. Otis's actions, Jesse thought, stemmed from motivations that were external to the game's competitive framework. Otis contested that interpretation and insisted that Jesse hold external concerns as irrelevant inside the game itself. Inside the game, as in the law, participants are meant to wear "masks" such that the rules apply independently of the player's identity (Noonan 1976). Drawing on a folk understanding of legal theory, Otis reminded Jesse that he saw him as a mask, not a person. As a full-fledged person with a life outside the game, Jesse was irrelevant to Otis's actions. He was merely going for the ball.

In the two cases above, Matt and Jesse both registered moralistic complaints through their public identification of a rule violation. The foul calls provided the opportunity for an indictment of morally problematic play. Players can make other kinds of statements through their foul calls as well. For example, an insult:

Dee was called for fouls on several consecutive possessions. A few plays later my teammates were griping about a call that Dee's teammate made and Dee yelled, "That was a foul dude! A fucking foul! Look, we don't *WANT* to call that weak shit, but ya'll are calling it so we *HAVE* to call it!"

In this case, Dee transformed the meaning of his teammate's foul call. He demanded that his opponents see this foul call in the context of all the calls they had made. Those calls, he said, were not merely wrong or unreasonable but were "weak". Players are often referred to as "weak" or "soft" for calling fouls on minor contact regardless of whether that contact was technically illegal. So Dee used this call to make a more general and derisive statement about his opponents' play. If they were unsatisfied with this call, they should see it as a reflection of their own "weak" behavior.

This section has outlined two important ways in which calling practices contribute to sustaining a game in the key of law. First, players hold one another accountable for calling “their own” fouls. At OVP players are expected to know that neither opponents nor teammates will announce a violation that is properly theirs to announce. The adversarial nature of the game itself is reflected in the adversarial nature of the calling behavior. Second, calling fouls and violations provides an opportunity for players to communicate moral dissatisfaction with each other’s play. Through the quality and tone of their call, they communicate complaints as well as insults. Calling fouls is not merely a matter of enforcing the rules of basketball. It is an opportunity to make meaningful statements about the morality of an opponent’s play and the game as a whole.

Contesting Calls and Disputing

I have been describing how pickup basketball players give significance and meaning to a game of basketball in the ways they perceive the game and in the ways they announce rule violations to other players. My analysis now continues to track the natural history of disputes as players contest the call which has labeled some piece of action as a rule violation. While the previous section showed players grumbling about the way calls were made, this section deals with open attempts to undermine the legitimacy of a call and to actually contest its enforcement. I consider a large repertoire of argumentative strategies and maneuvers through which players contest opponents’ calls.

One general way that players contest the legitimacy of a violation announcement is to take issue with the process of calling rather than the play itself. Regardless of the facts, if the correct protocol was not followed the whole case can be thrown out. Players know that injustice is not only about unfair or arbitrary rules, but about the unfair or arbitrary application of rules.

Like lawyers arguing over the legitimacy of pieces of evidence, the location of the trial, or the members of the jury, basketball players enforce appropriate legal procedure on one another.

A common complaint along these lines is the ambiguity of the call itself. Confusion abounds when players let out verbal grunts of pain or exasperation as others may interpret those noises as foul calls. If a defender stops playing in response to a grunt and the offensive player goes on to score an uncontested basket, there is likely to be disagreement as to whether that basket should count. In an attempt to demand clarity, Dee often argues that only the specific word “foul” should be respected as a legitimate call. This never sticks as players continue to use a diverse array of colloquialisms to announce a rule violation. However, if it can be established that enough defenders stopped playing in response to a grunt, the subsequent basket will not be counted. Like all disputes this outcome is up for grabs as the grunter may claim that his grunt was obviously “just a grunt”.

Another procedural argument is that the call was not made on time. A player should not be allowed to decide whether or not to call a violation after he sees how the play turns out. Calls that are made “too late” are often dismissed promptly and emphatically:

After a series of fakes Robbie laid the ball into the basket. As he ran back on defense Steve said that he thought Robbie had committed a traveling violation. Jay immediately yelled at him, “You gotta call it before the shot goes in though. You didn’t say shit til’ he already made it!” Steve momentarily argued the details of the play with Robbie but it was Jay who put the discussion to rest when he yelled, “It doesn’t matter dude! Did it look awkward? Hell yeah. But you gotta call that shit when it happens! There’s no discussion!”

Jay successfully disputed the legitimacy of Steve’s call by referencing a possible source of injustice. Had Robbie missed the shot, it may have been in Steve’s advantage to *not* make the call at all. Given that Robbie made the shot however, it was certainly in Steve’s interest to make the call and enforce the rule. Jay ensured that Steve was not allowed to practice such strategic

rule enforcement. Though Robbie actually engaged Steve on the details of the play itself, it is more difficult to come to agreement on those grounds. Jay was able to dismiss the case on procedural grounds by arguing that Steve had missed the opportunity to call a violation.

Wayne articulated this argument even more forcefully one day when he called a travelling violation on Jeff as Jeff attempted an awkward looking shot. Although Jeff's wild attempt swished through the net, Wayne insisted the basket should not count. Jeff argued that if he had travelled, it was only because his defender had pushed him illegally beforehand. If the basket was going to be discounted due to a travelling violation, Jeff reasoned that he was fouled and deserved to retain possession of the ball.

Wayne yelled, "Right but you didn't call shit! You didn't even think about calling a foul until you realized you traveled. That's not how it works. You tried to play through it cuz you thought you were gonna score!"

Interestingly, Wayne actually agreed that Jeff's travelling violation was the result of illegal contact. But Wayne argued that Jeff had only called the foul in response to Wayne calling the travelling violation. Wayne understood this as an attempt to retrospectively enforce rules that Jeff had willingly ignored during the play itself. He argued that Jeff had implicitly renounced his rights to call the foul by continuing to play. So despite the fact that Wayne agreed that Jeff was fouled, he successfully argued against the legitimacy of the basket through a nuanced reading of the timing of the call in relation to the unfolding play.

A final way to contest the legitimacy of calls on procedural grounds is to argue that the player who called the violation did not have the appropriate rights to make the call. As discussed earlier, the most common example of this is to demand that the victim himself make the call. In the following example, Calvin's rights to make a call are challenged on different grounds:

Calvin yelled out from the opposite end of the court, "Travel! You walked!" There were groans from his opponents. Matt was especially vocal from the sideline. "Come on

Calvin, you can't call that from back there. You're too far from the play to even know!" Pointing to players closer to the action Matt said, "Let them make the call!" Calvin snapped back at Matt that he saw the violation despite his poor vantage point. When some other spectators suggested that Calvin's call was accurate, Matt said to them, "You don't know what you're talking about! He can't make that call. Maybe if he ran back and played defense, I'd say okay. But Calvin's the laziest motherfucker out here my nigga. He doesn't get to make that call!"

Calvin's rights to make the call were contested on two grounds. First, Calvin was so far away from the play under question that he was expected to allow players with a better vantage point make the call. Matt's criticism continued, however, with a moral indictment of Calvin's behavior. Not only should Calvin not make the call because he couldn't physically see, he did not deserve to make the call because he was too lazy to run and help his teammates play defense. In fact, Calvin has become infamous for a lazy brand of play. Players occasionally whisper about his insufficient effort and wasted physical potential. By invoking that reputation in his argument, Matt departed from a strictly rule-based argument to invoke a more personal or "relational" brand of legal discourse (Conley and O'Barr 1990). Calvin's call, Matt argued, should hold less merit given what everybody knows about the kind of player he is.

Thus, callers are challenged if they were understood to be not playing the "right way." If a player was seen as playing "soft" or in an unaggressive style, if his play lacked certain fundamental skills, or if he displayed morally insufficient effort a player may find himself with reduced rights to enforce a rule. One day I had a long discussion with Nick in which he recalled an instance from a past game when he refused to call a foul despite illegal contact. I asked him why he didn't make the call and he explained to me, "Well, [I didn't call it] because I fucked up and lost the ball anyway. If it was just the foul that had made me lose the ball, then I would have called it for sure. But I knew I fucked up too. That's how I usually think about it." So for Nick, a player who is in the midst of making a bad play loses some of the moral grounds on which he

can legitimately make a call. Regardless of whether it was a “real foul”, Nick felt that foul calls should not be used to undo the consequences of an ongoing mistake.²⁷

Thus far I’ve dealt with strategies for contesting the legitimacy of calls that focus on appropriate procedure and ignore the facticity of the event in question. But players also regularly confront the details of the play in question and argue that, in fact, a rule violation had not occurred. Players from the opposing team often present alternative versions of the self-same event. The task of deciding which version is the “true” version is a serious practical challenge with no easy solution. In his research on traffic courts, Mel Pollner (1987) describes a “reality disjuncture” as a situation in which two plausible versions of the same event must be accounted for in order to sustain our belief in a single, observable, objective reality. While traffic litigants rely on a judge to choose the true version, pickup basketball players must work this out together.

In order to try to convince their opponents that their version of the play is the correct version, players search for convincing evidence. A common method is to perform reenactments which display a version of the play that emphasizes that performer’s view of its legality or illegality. For example, Rasheed showed how he had landed in bounds before he touched the ball, an indication that his team should maintain possession of the ball.

Holding the ball out in his left arm and his right arm straight out to his right, Rasheed walked up to Reggie and tried to show how he had jumped in bounds and caught the ball. He emphatically landed with his feet inside the legal playing area, then smacked the ball with both hands to display when in the course of his jumping and landing he had caught the ball.

While such demonstrations are very common they are rarely very effective as opponents can easily produce reenactments of the play that portray a different set of facts and lead to the

²⁷ In fact, pickup basketball players invoke a legal metaphor to refer to situations in which a foul call saves a player from making a bad play. That situation is commonly referred to as a “bail out”.

opposite outcome. In fact, the demonstrations have the potential to backfire if a player unwittingly demonstrates his own rule violation.

I attempted to show Julio how I had not travelled. I tossed the ball to myself, caught it, and then took a dribble. Julio watched my feet carefully and said, “Exactly dude. You just travelled right there and that’s exactly what you did. You moved your feet before you put the ball down. It’s so engrained in you to do that. You do it even when you’re trying to show how you didn’t do it!”

Another strategy for convincing opponents of the validity of a particular version of the event under question is to call on witnesses to corroborate. While it is generally easy to find a teammate to confirm one’s version of the play, they are easily dismissed by opponents who presume them to be biased by their team’s interest. If a disputant can find a member of the opposing team to corroborate their version, they gain a valuable resource in the dispute. Especially if the corroborating opponent was involved in the play under question, the dispute is typically brought toward quick conclusion. In the most heated disputes, however, players become furious with teammates who speak against them. Thus, players who are unsure of what happened or who agree with their opponent often remain silent during the heat of the debate. They may even walk away from the disputants to show that they have no interest in expressing an opinion. The lack of involvement from players who might speak against their own team’s interest prolongs disputes between players who wholeheartedly believe in the righteousness of their cause.

Sideline spectators are highly contested eye witnesses. While they have a greater claim to an unbiased opinion and often enjoyed an excellent vantage point during the play under question, spectators are often dismissed as intervening in a dispute that is none of their business. A spectator once yelled to others on the sideline “Be quiet sideline! Let them work this out themselves!” Other times, even sideline spectators are questioned for their biases:

Rasheed turned to Sirat and said, “Shut the fuck up! You’re on the sideline homie. I know he’s your boy [friend] and all, but you gotta remember that you’re on the sideline, you’re a fucking spectator.” Rasheed’s opponent Gary said, “I’m everybody’s boy!” and Rasheed responded, “I know you are, but that don’t mean you can make bullshit calls! Ask any ref in America. They would not give you that call.”

In the absence of a referee who might be trusted to make a truly unbiased ruling, players struggle to find evidence or witnesses that can sway the opinion of their opponents.

With no good resources to easily resolve disputes as questions of fact, players occasionally confront the very nature and definition of the game they are playing. Given that the rules of basketball constitute and define the activity, they must negotiate how far they can stray and still claim they are playing the same game. This can become a live question for players in the heat of disputes.

Eventually Ace admitted that he touched the ball while it was above the rim, and therefore had technically committed a goal-tending violation. Ace said, “Yeah I touched it, we play through that shit out here though. That’s an NBA call yo! I never seen anybody try to call that in a street ball game!” When he said that it was an “NBA call” Derrick immediately snapped back, “What are we gonna go by!?! Oh you wanna play street ball!?! Aight nigga, let’s play street ball! I didn’t know that’s how you wanted to play, but if you wanna play street ball we’ll play street ball nigga!”

By questioning whether the rule ought to apply in this kind of game, Ace switched from an argument of fact to an argument of jurisdiction. This rule, he claimed, need not apply to the kind of game that we were playing - a “street ball” game.

Derrick contested that definition of our activity and proposed a different vision for what it would mean to ignore the rule in question. For Derrick, allowing this rule to go unenforced would open us to the potential of chaos. How many other rules would we have to ignore if we let this one slide? Further, if we opted to play in a chaotic and lawless game, Derrick threatened to take full advantage. He portrayed himself as the kind of player who would actually excel during a lawless game in which his opponents would need to fear his unrestrained physicality.

So players navigate between two possible sources of injustice. On one hand the situation of pure legalism - the mechanical and unreflective application of rules - can inhibit the experience of justice (Bardach and Kagan 2002). As Nick once said in reference to a rule that prohibits “carrying” the basketball, “Everybody carries out here sometimes. You could call it every play. The question is do we want to just be making call after call after call? Or do we want to play basketball?” Like Ace, Nick argued the game is corrupted if the rule is applied too strictly to borderline instances. There should be some leeway in using the rule to regulate against only those instances which clearly violate the spirit of the rule. On the other hand, to decide that on any given occasion the rules of basketball may or may not be enforced creates a game that is so unpredictable it no longer facilitates the experience of justice. For Lon Fuller (1963) this is one of the fundamental roads to legal disaster as law’s “internal morality” is desecrated if individuals cannot anticipate how their behavior will be treated by those charged with enforcing the rules.

In challenging the legitimacy of violations, players navigate between these different sources of injustice that threaten the experience they want to have in playing the basketball game. Even when they act in their own team’s strategic interest, they make the effort to organize their argument in a way that gives it the accent of legitimacy. They are concerned with how the ruling on a particular case matters for future cases and for the meaning of the entire activity. In these arguments players are fundamentally concerned with the fact that the game is less meaningful and less fun if one team walks away believing they have been robbed. Players engage legal sensibilities²⁸ in full awareness that “because I said so” is not a good enough reason for their call to stand.

²⁸ Geertz (1983) referred to “legal sensibilities” as the navigation between particular facts and a general vision for how social life ought to be organized. It is a particular way of “imagining the real”.

Doing giving up and resuming play

Because players struggle to create agreement about what happened during the play under question, disputes can drag on for many minutes. Arguments go back and forth. One player may demonstrate the play and articulate an argument that convinces one opponent, only to have another opponent jump in with vigorous disagreement. For play to resume something must give. Regardless of whether they ever come to agreement on the facts of the play, they must decide which team will resume the game with the ball and what the score will be.

In all disputes, but especially in disputes that have become heated, it's rare for one player to convince another that his account of the play is correct. Rather, play is typically resumed only when one player gives up and allows play to resume under his opponent's conditions. Players do not *just* give up, however. They do so in strategic ways and at strategic moments. Players give up in ways that resonate with two concerns: the collective memory of the situation and the meaning that the outcome has for one's face or sense of self.

Most subtly, for instance, as players give in to an opponent's call they may deliver the idiomatic expression "respect the call!" as they prepare to resume play. On the one hand, the player portrays himself as a reasonable and trusting individual. But delivered with just a hint of sarcasm, the expression also serves to remind others that the call was not so objectively self-evident that it was beyond question. Announcing that the call ought to be respected is hardly an admission of guilt. Rather, it may serve as a resource in future disputes as players point back to the previous call as an instance where the opponent had already been given the benefit of the doubt.

Giving up on a dispute is also a strategic time to deliver an insult. While preparing to play, teammates of the culprit often yell to the victim, "You've been doing the same shit to us all

day and we don't call shit!" or "That's a weak call homie!" When these complaints are made as everybody prepares to resume play, they are not meant to challenge the dispute's outcome. Rather, they serve to register that the "weakness" of the call has not gone unnoticed. They contribute to the collective understanding that a certain player or an entire team has a developing pattern of making bad calls. If the pattern continues players may feel increasingly emboldened to hold their ground in later disputes. So even when there is no longer a challenge to the rule's enforcement, players are concerned with how the play is remembered:

Dejuan called a travelling violation against Dave. Dejuan yelled, "He shuffled his feet when he pump faked! Cuz he changed his mind. He was gonna go up and then he shuffled his feet!" Dave's teammate Matt disagreed. Matt claimed that Dave kept his feet firmly on the ground during the "pump fake". Dejuan let it go. He passed the ball to his opponent saying "Aight it's your ball, but he did travel. Just know that he really did travel."

The point here is that even when Dejuan backed off his attempt to enforce the rule, he was still overtly concerned with controlling the collective memory of the play. He wanted to set the record straight.

By reminding others that the true facts of the play are not being honored in the conditions of resumption, players create a resource that may be drawn on in subsequent situations. In the very next possession Dejuan called another travelling violation by yelling, "Now *THAT* was a travel!" The emphasis on "that" points to the contrast with the previous play. Having registered a dissenting opinion in the case with Dave, Dejuan created a resource for calling a more certain violation just moments later.

While Dejuan retrospectively invoked the relevance of a previous case, sometimes players explicitly anticipate how a current outcome can shape future rulings. Especially early in a day of basketball, players may give up on a dispute and chalk it up to the need to set a precedent for the rest of the day. For example, one day Matt had one of his foul calls contested

on the grounds that he had only made the call after he saw that his shot did not go in. That is, he made the call too late. After a few minutes of yelling back and forth, Matt gave in and as he prepared to resume play he called out:

“Okay everybody we’re good now! You call your shit right away when it happens or it ain’t gonna be respected. That’s it, that’s how it’s gonna be. Just call your shit when it happens!” Everybody seemed to respect that solution and play began again.

Matt was concerned that the “late call” policy could be arbitrarily applied to him and then forgotten when other players inevitably did the same thing. He tolerated losing the dispute only by making very explicit the need for this policy to apply going forward. Whereas Dejuan wanted to generate the memory of a factually incorrect outcome, Matt merely wanted to demand consistency moving forward.

In other cases, giving up is more directly tied to negotiating the meaning for self and the need to save face. Saving face is especially challenging after long and heated disputes in which players have invested a lot of themselves in the argument. Players search for and invoke accounts of how giving up does not implicate weakness in the face of a forceful opponent. For example:

Reggie called out that the score was “nine-zero” and Rasheed blew up: “It’s EIGHT-zero my nigga! Eight-zero. It’s been eight to zero!” One spectator sitting on the sideline mockingly called out across the entire court: “Okay, call it eight to zero, ya’ll still shouldn’t be proud! You don’t even have a bucket! How are grown men gonna come play at the park and not score a fuckin bucket!?!” Nick, who was on Reggie’s team, wandered toward the sideline and commented, “I guess my jumper got taken away.” Neil, another teammate of Reggie and Nick, looked over to the players on the sideline and said, “Whatever man,” He shrugged and continued, “eight or nine to zero, we’re still kicking their ass.”

Not long after these comments, the game was re-started with a score of 8-0. Although all players came to agree on the conditions of resumption, they did not agree on the reality of the score.

Nick, for example, noted that a score of 8-0 must mean that his most recent basket was taken away. The result was unjust in that his team lost credit for a basket that, in reality, was made.

Reggie and his teammates were able to give up by finding a way to rationalize how giving in to Rasheed was not a sign of their own weakness. The spectator validated Reggie's team's domination and assisted them in seeing how giving up put them in higher esteem relative to Rasheed's petty complaint. Through this interpretation, the act of giving up did not mean that Rasheed got his way through force, but that Reggie's team was "kicking their ass" so badly that they could afford to let it go. Their domination was actually ratified and enhanced by giving up on the dispute and "giving away" a basket.

A final case shows an explicit and vigorous interest in both setting precedent and saving face. Juan argued vigorously that a travelling violation called against him was unfair because he had been fouled first. Eventually he gave up angrily.

"You know what?" Junior said, "Fuck that man. Take it." He ran decidedly back toward the opposite end of the court. "Next time you come into the lane, I'm gonna smack the shit out of you and you better not say shit! Let's play!" One opponent then suggested that Juan accept the compromise of "shooting for it" but Juan had already made up his mind and demanded his opponents take the ball. He was very determined as we started to play again and played with more aggression and energy on that next defensive possession.

In rejecting the offer to accept a compromise,²⁹ Juan transformed the meaning of giving up. For Juan, the fact that he had been called for a traveling violation was the product of his opponents' corruption and a compromise would only let them off the hook and allow them to feel they had acted reasonably. By rejecting the compromise Juan claimed additional rights to respond to this injustice with less restrained physicality and violence. He set a precedent for future non-calls.

²⁹ When players "shoot for it" they take an uncontested shot from the three-point arc. The dispute is decided by whether the shot is made or missed.

Though threatening violence hardly appears to be a legalistic mode of resumption, Juan forms up his threat as a response to his opponent's unjust behavior. He wanted to ensure that his opponents lived with the full implication of the injustice. In fact, the result of this threat was not increased violence, but increased litigiousness. When the game resumed, Juan played with heightened energy and physicality. He was more likely to bump into opponents and, invoking this play as precedent, was more likely to stand his ground in response to their foul calls. The potential for more law-like interactions was increased and indeed the rest of the game was riddled with disputes. By giving up in the way he did Juan produced momentum for the game's continued adversarial and legalistic quality.

In the way they give up, players show that the dispute was not merely about correcting an injustice, but about the meaning of their activity going forward. As in calling and contesting rule violations, players give up in ways that generate meaningful statements about self and game. To give up on a dispute while establishing precedent means something quite different than giving up because the game is "just for fun". So even as players are unsatisfied with the outcome, giving up in the key of law keeps alive the possibility of future injustices and generates resources for future disputes. Players project their concern for injustice forward into the game itself and transition seamlessly back into perceiving the action in the key of law.

Conclusion

In studying the disputing behavior of pickup basketball players there might be a tendency to expect that the biggest, tallest, most skilled, most popular, or most aggressive players rule the day. We might, in fact, be tempted to perform a study that examines the inherent bias of the scene. In this chapter I took a different analytic tactic. Regardless of whether there is "real bias," the players at Ocean View Park return week after week to a scene that they understand as

basically fair. This is no small accomplishment as the game yields constant moments of disagreement, trouble, and dispute.

I have examined how players organize their behavior to resist the interpretation that the game is ruled by biased, unjust, or corrupt forces. This accomplishment requires a particular method and mode of watching the unfolding action. It requires the construction of individual instances as cases of a more general type which can be remembered and compared. It requires the active appeal to reason through which players compare instances and propose solutions. Finally, it requires some willingness to give in and allow the game to proceed under alternative conditions. These practices generate a gestalt of perceiving, interpreting, reasoning, and action that I have summarized as the “key of law”.

Through these interactions players define the games as more than “just play”. The men do not come to merely play around. They organize the action such that the games evoke something existentially real and significant. Keying their actions to identify and treat cases of injustice, players allow the game to reveal something real and true about their character. In chapter 4 I presented the situation of the “and one” in which significant meaning is drawn from those situations where players make a basket despite illegal contact. If players failed to take the rules seriously, the ego victory implicit in the “and one” moment would dissipate all together. It is impossible to feel like a hero, a rebel, a miracle worker, or a leader if the rules are meaningless or the whole activity is a joke. If one’s opponent is laughing during a game-winning shot, it hardly means the same thing. For this reason, victories in dispute-ridden games are celebrated with great emotion and pleasure while losses generate much disgust and disappointment.

Legal scholar Art Leff has made much of the ludic features of an American criminal trial (Leff 1978). He argues that the trial is an artefact with two separate impulses. On the one hand,

they are organized to determine the truth. But on the other hand, they are organized to determine the victor. Cut off from the rules of talk and argumentation that structure everyday encounters, the trial rewards the lawyer-champion who is most capable of presenting a convincing case within the rules of the trial-game. This chapter, in a way, has made the opposite case. As they call rule violations, contest those calls, and make cases based on precedent and the admissibility of evidence, players transform the significance of their play through a legal metaphor. They create a real and legitimate game that sustains their motivation to take it seriously. They are not just playing around.

But if legality is invoked, legalism is resisted. On a number of occasions injured players have offered to referee a game in order to try to eliminate delays caused by constant disputing. Players participating in the game have inevitably resisted these offers. To put their faith in an “objective” outsider would reduce some of the scene’s charm forged over the years as players learn the idiosyncratic tendencies that are allowed at the court and give leeway to certain players in certain situations.

Cole provides the most vivid example. As one of the tallest players on the court, he often grabs the ball directly under his offensive basket and attempts to put the ball immediately back through the hoop. Knowing that they have little chance of stopping him without fouling, other players will foul on purpose. They drape themselves on his back, chop down across his arms, and try to hold him to the floor. When they do so, they often call a foul on themselves, bringing the game to a halt before Cole can put the ball through the basket. Cole then becomes furious demanding that he be allowed to “call his own fouls”. He is so strong that he prefers to persevere through the contact and try to score in spite of his opponents’ efforts to halt the game by fouling him strategically. Over the course of years, this situation has caused countless

disputes in which opponents demand that Kyle can't have it both ways. That is, he can't call fouls in these situations sometimes and then refuse to call fouls other times when he thinks he's going to make the shot. The resulting compromise has become what Doc once referred to as the "Cole rule". Cole never calls fouls underneath the basket. His teammates and his opponents know it. Players continue to hack Cole in what are "obvious fouls" but Cole stays true to his preference. With opponents hanging off of him Cole will miss lay ups and run back on defense, accepting the fate he has chosen for himself. He never calls a thing.

Regulars at the court also know that Justin has a hitch in his dribble. Many feel it is a violation that gives him an advantage when driving toward the basket. After a long hiatus at the court due to injury, he came back one day and Tony warned him after a borderline violation, "Yo J, it's great to have you back out here man. But if you think you're getting away with that bullshit today you're kidding yourself." After the game, Justin approached Tony and told him that he wanted to be honest about it. He wanted to play the right way and they demonstrated for one another in slow motion the particularities of a legal and illegal dribble.

So these decisions become part of the court's lore. Players want to work them out informally so that they retain some flexibility. But they vividly resist any implication that they are systematically biased or corrupt. These are real games but they are *their* real games.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have presented a case study of Ocean View Park as it is made into a particular kind of public place. It hosts a uniquely charming, vivid, and informal form of “pickup” use that has been sustained over the past 30 years. Using historical, biographical, and interactionist data I have tried to account for the continued presence of this scene as a form of social integration. I now situate this form of park use in the context of other uses of public space in order to show what is distinctly integrative about the pickup context. Finally, I review some of the contingencies that facilitate pickup basketball at Ocean View Park by considering the sociological importance of “fun”. After all, that the players experience the scene as fun is critical to its sustained existence.

Pickup as Public Place Improvisation

When people venture out of the privacy of their homes into the public sphere they anticipate a waning sense of control over who they will come into contact with. Whether living by oneself or with a spouse, family, or roommate, one maintains fairly consistent expectations of who will be encountered in private. And typically those expectations come to fruition. Not so in public. Walking onto the street I immediately anticipate that I might see just about anybody and just about anybody might see me. At first we put on a fairly generic version of self while sensing that nobody in particular is watching or interacting with us. But as we engage more practical tasks in the world we maintain a sense of the kinds of others we are likely to encounter. And unlike the privacy of our homes we often find our expectations undermined by the seemingly random and chaotic winds of the public sphere.

A long history of ethnographies and interactionist studies have shown the various strategies for navigating the public sphere and the different situational contingencies that present new challenges and opportunities. Goffman famously argued that people in public generally work to sustain “civil inattention” (Goffman 1963). They politely disattend from the details of one another’s actions without ignoring their existence all together. They pay homage to a common humanity by treating strangers civilly, but don’t allow themselves to stare in obsession lest they be observed being overly interested. Hirschauer (2005) showed in fine detail how strangers do civil inattention in elevators, a situation where proximity to strangers creates a special challenge. In public parks individuals can easily be observed engaging the work of civil inattention. Joggers move to the side of the path to allow others to pass, picnickers space themselves just the appropriate amount from their neighbors, and dog walkers manage their pets attention lest they get pulled too far into the social world of another human being. Even on the Santa Monica beaches just moments from Ocean View Park people are typically “alone together” (Edgerton 1979). The exception proves the rule when people in the public sphere show undo or offensive interest. Actors respond in kind by drawing on more blatant and visible methods of ignoring them (Emerson and Gardner 1997; Gardner 1995).

In addition to the individual work of civil inattention, Lynn Lofland has described how people manage the chaos of the public sphere by travelling in groups. A “traveling pack” essentially creates a sense of mobile privacy. Entering a public park with friends, people sustain a sense of comfort knowing that they can use one another to ignore or resist intrusions from the chaotic world outside. Urban ethnographies are full of these groups. From William H. Whyte’s social club (Whyte 1943), to Suttles’ ethnic gangs in Chicago (Suttles 1968), to contemporary ghetto men “on the run” (Goffman 2009), to suburbanites picking fights (Jackson-Jacobs 2004),

to family outings (Lareau 2003), ethnographies are full of people moving through public spaces while leaning on already established and pre-made ties. The same is typically true of ethnographic studies of sport. Even when taking place in a publicly owned park, people's engagements in sporting scenes are often determined by league institutions or community affiliations (Brooks 2009; Fine 1979; Grasmuck 2005). Today in urban parks all kind of group affiliations can be identified. Fitness classes form tight huddles and mark themselves off with uniforms that set them apart. Church groups and ROTC training corps bring pre-made affiliations to the park as well.

Ethnographies also show a range of spaces which, while technically available to anybody, become privatized by a particular group of insiders (Lofland 1985). Bars and street corners often become "home territories" for people seeking a coherent sense of place in the city (Anderson 1978; Cavan 1966; Duneier 1992). Housing complexes and entire neighborhoods may also be experienced as relatively private places for insiders to be defended from outsiders (Venkatesh 2002).

All of these examples present a different use of public space than what I have presented in this dissertation. At Ocean View Park something more improvisational has emerged. It is not sustained by a particular institutional authority which generates a sense of group-ness away from park life. There is no practical or commercial cause which pulls people into fleeting interaction as in a store, mall, or shopping facility. The men who play at the park are not interested in defending their place against outsiders in order to sustain insider group life. Rather, they arrive at the park expecting to mix up and participate in vivid interactions with a series of others who they know to different degrees and in different ways. Some are total strangers, others are merely recognized, others are known strangers, and still others are intimate friends.

In some ways, the charm and image of such a scene is what justifies the creation of public parks in the first place. Planners, politicians, and community activists love the idea of publicly owned open spaces which bring together diverse slices of the community. And yet, more often parks are used in ways that sustain rigid and ossified social boundaries and group affiliations. The “pickup” quality that can take over in public space hasn’t received nearly the analytic attention that it deserves, in part because of the methodological challenges for understanding something so fluid, open, and spontaneous (though see Trouille 2013). Though pickup sports are perhaps most common they represent just one example of improvisational park use. Chess boards, public roller rinks, skate parks, and dog parks also potentiate some degree of improvisational park use.

“Fun” as Outcome and Engine

Pickup park use is held in a fragile balance. It depends on the collective organization of (typically) dense urban life to overcome the barriers which otherwise keep people separated by their residential, domestic, and institutional affiliations. But if it pulls the same people together too often in the same way, an insider clique is formed and the integrative potential is threatened.

At the risk of oversimplification, fun appears to be both a necessary ingredient and outcome for the continued existence of the basketball game at Ocean View Park. A sufficient number of individuals must, on any given day, anticipate that a trip to the park will afford them a particularly kind of fun. Then, expecting to have fun, they must generally have those expectations confirmed at the park in order to sustain their motivation to return on a future day of play. In moving toward a conclusion to this dissertation and as a way to reflect the explanation I have provided for pickup park use at OVP, I relate the substantive themes of the previous

chapters to the theory of social ontology presented by Erving Goffman in his essay “Fun in Games” (Goffman 1961b)

Goffman saw the social situation, especially the “face-to-face ecological huddle” which he referred to as the “encounter,” as a fundamental unit of sociological analysis (Goffman 1961a:8). And while all encounters afford participants the possibility for “fun,” play and games are unique in that participants justify their involvement primarily on the fun afforded them. Serious and work encounters, on the other hand, are largely defined by the fact that they are justified on grounds apart from the pleasure they provide (Goffman 1961b:17).

To understand the potential for fun, Goffman invoked a biological metaphor, describing the “interaction membrane” which sets any encounter apart from its larger context. Like a cell’s relationship to its surrounding physical environment, the boundary which separates the encounter from the outside world selectively allows in, transforms, and keeps out particular features of the social world at large. In the case of gaming encounters, participants can have fun when they sustain an interaction membrane that ignores certain features of the world at large while giving new relevance to other features. Games, he says, are “world building activities” and their pleasure depends on participants’ remaining engrossed in the world marked off by the interaction membrane. The jump shot is only possible in a basketball game, stealing third in a baseball game, and checkmate in a chess match. To gain the accent of reality, these actions require that participants treat as irrelevant a near infinite array of features of the everyday world. Ignoring whether chess pieces are made of wood or gold, players find that the game affords them new self-evocative possibilities.

In this dissertation I have treated the basketball games at Ocean View Park as one such gaming encounter. The empirical chapters can be read as a description of how that membrane,

facilitated by the local ecology, is built and rebuilt on each occasion of play. Without fees to commit players to participate, monetary wagers which generate external consequences, league officials who provide the institutional accent of seriousness, or referees who sustain the encounter as a feature of their work world, the players themselves must create and sustain an interaction membrane which sufficiently engrosses them in the basketball cosmos.

As a study of social integration the previous empirical chapters aimed to describe just how much of the world at large is allowed into the basketball encounter and how people relate in new ways as they construct and dwell within the interaction membrane together. Goffman argued that the potential for fun is contingent on building a membrane which is sufficiently porous to allow in a wider-than-usual swath of the world at large. If a party only consists of “the same old people” or if a gambler bets only a nominal sum, the encounter can easily become boring. On the other hand, the membrane must sufficiently cut the encounter off from the world lest participants “flood out” into the surrounding chaos. In his words:

“... the euphoria function for any sociable occasion resides somewhere between little social difference and much social difference. A dissolution of some externally based social distance must be achieved, a penetration of ego-boundaries, but not to an extent that renders the participants fearful, threatened, or self-consciously concerned with what is happening socially.” (Goffman 1961b:79)

The fun of pickup basketball is contingent on the balance between public and private. The game can't be closed off to all but an internally organized and maintained group. At OVP even the most regular players' fun is facilitated by the presence of complete strangers. But neither can the encounter be open to anybody and everybody at once lest the uncertainty and unpredictability overwhelm them. Chapters 2 and 3 depicted the balance that has been struck at Ocean View Park.

In chapter 2 I showed how historical processes contributed to the production of a relatively intimate park environment. Nestled between apartment high rises, the park sits quietly as a resource for those who know about it but doesn't advertise itself to the masses of beach goers and shoppers in the surrounding neighborhood. I contrasted the production of intimacy at OVP with the historical processes which facilitated a massive and iconic basketball park a mile down the road in Venice. The men who play basketball at OVP do so as an alternative to the significantly less stable and less predictable scene in Venice. This chapter provided evidence that the processes which generate public park space, especially whether the park was understood as a positive resource or as a negation of alternative land use plans, can have consequences for the quality of social encounters that are ultimately supported.

If chapter 2 depicted how the park was physically cut off from its surroundings, chapter 3 showed how diversity is nonetheless introduced into the basketball encounter. The men who play at the park do not constitute a uniform social group. The same men are not present each day and the men who arrive to play have a diversity of practical interests in and relationships to the park. They arrive anticipating a focused encounter with others very different from themselves. For some players the park is a place to experience some of the most important relationships in their lives. But they do so in a context where they anticipate and rely on the presence of relatively unknown others. A Buddhist philosophy enthusiast, a Jewish ER doctor, black rappers and musicians, and a number of restaurant workers hold the park in common if very little else.

In the process of organizing and populating the game these biographical differences become dialectically intertwined. For a variety of practical purposes, their differences are ignored. In chapter 4 I showed how the players form teams in ways that do not strictly honor pre-made relationships or affiliations. They mix themselves up according to a first-come-first-

serve policy that leaves some room for negotiation but always remains open to newcomers. Skilled players and novices alike take a seat after a loss, knowing that they had their opportunity to perform well and earn a longer stay on the court. In chapter 5 I showed how disputes are also pursued in a way that honors the world of basketball on its own terms. Players refuse to admit special treatment to any set of players, lest the gaming encounter lose its logic all together. They referee the game and negotiate outcomes to disputes according to the game's constitutive rules.

But ignoring their biographical differences on one hand serves as a resource for their subtle reintroduction on the other. The cosmopolitan character of the scene becomes itself a resource for play as they make lighthearted racial and ethnic jabs that everybody is happy to treat as playful. Players who have made off-court connections at bars, clubs, and night leagues bring those meanings with them to the park and allow them to be visible to other players who come to understand their own relationship to the scene in the context of others'. Incidents that re-focus the encounter's attention on realities external to the game must be handled by momentarily suspending play in order to resume the game moments later. So when children cry, a dog runs onto the court, or somebody wants to break to smoke a blunt, everybody notes the biographical significance of the side event but sustains the relevance of resuming the gaming encounter itself.

According to Goffman, social occasions may be fun and exciting precisely because they pull together people who otherwise might not engage one another on level ground. Workers and employers may find themselves around a dinner table chatting sociably in ways that would be irrelevant in their work encounters. Their status differences may become relevant at dinner, but not quite in the same way they are used to. At dinner, they have equal rights to demand that the other pass the salt. And so it is at the basketball court where differences are ignored on one hand and then subtly reintroduced on the other. The scene at the basketball court is thus much more

integrative than strangers passing by in public but not so integrative that differences are effaced all together.

Existential Reflections in Public

But fun in games is not strictly a matter of a sufficiently porous interaction membrane. Within the gaming encounter itself, Goffman argued, there must be a degree of uncertainty in the outcome. If the games were fixed in advance or ruled by biased forces, players would lose the logic of their own participation. Whether players arrive for exercise, to hang out with friends, or to prepare for a league game, they all share the desire to test themselves inside of a game that affords them the opportunity to emerge victorious. The question “can I win?” must hold some real existential implications for everybody who arrives to ask it.

Thus, in chapter 5 I showed that through resolving disputes they construct a “real game” such that the outcome will have real existential significance. They do so in ways that make statements about oneself as a moral, reasonable, clearheaded individual. But they also honor this particular game as having a local history and culture that is valuable for its own sake. Rules can be occasionally bent when “we all know everybody does it” or when the rule breaker’s violation is so familiar that to enforce it would be to violate the sanctity of this game for the sake of a timeless and invisible rulebook. Honoring *these* rules at *this* park is simultaneously a way of staking one’s own place in the infinite and unceasing motion of urban public life.

And so when they play, run, jump, and bang into one another, the significance of those moments resonates beyond the boundaries of the court itself. Indeed, men at the park sometimes even find self-evocative significance in the action that the rules of the game ignore. The “and one” moment stands as the pre-eminent example. Though the collective reality of the game cares

not one bit whether a basket is scored as an “and one”, the self-inflating or self-deflating meaning of the moment is real. Again, quoting Goffman:

Whatever the interaction, then, there is this dual theme: The wider world must be introduced, but in a controlled and disguised manner. Individuals can deal with one another face-to-face because they are ready to abide by rules of irrelevance, but the rules seem to exist to let something difficult be quietly expressed as much as to exclude it entirely from the scene. Given the dangers of expression, a disguise may function not so much as a way of concealing something as a way of revealing as much of it as can be tolerated in an encounter. We fence our encounters in with gates; the very means by which we hold off a part of reality can be the means by which we can bear introducing it” (Goffman 1961b:77–78).

Though on the basketball court at Ocean View Park there is nothing “quiet” about moments of existential glory, they nonetheless go unstated. Precisely what it means to score on an opponent, to dominate him, or to get an “and one” is never fully articulated. Players construct the game as a real test of self-versus-other and (insofar as the game is in public) as self-versus-world such that sitting down on the sideline after a loss is experienced as a real ego blow. The victors experience the opposite. Without fully articulating the insulting implications, everybody knows what is meant when the victor turns to his recent victim and casually encourages him to enjoy watching the next game.

The more I spent time at Ocean View Park the more I began to document moments when the existential implications inside the gaming reality, typically left implicit, were brought to the surface through moments of open discussion and elaboration. An early incident along these lines:

Craig just lost a game in which one of his teammates, Patrick, had made a series of critical errors. Still, Craig had continually passed the ball to Patrick giving him more opportunities to make the right play. Patrick had failed. Matt had been on Craig’s team and after the game told Craig that he needed to freeze Patrick out, “You know what he can’t do,” Matt said, “So don’t put him in positions that require him to do those things!” Craig responded, “Carl told me the same damn thing!” Matt stood up with a basketball and demonstrated for Craig how he treats players like Patrick on the court. He threw a series of ball fakes to demonstrate how he would fake a pass to Patrick without ever

intending to actually pass him the ball. “I guess I’m just too nice,” Craig continued, “I’m not really a grimey kind of brother. I can be, but it’s not my nature. I guess that’s why I’m sitting here on the sideline.”

In this case, Craig looked into the game and pulled out lessons about the nature of social life in general. He saw in the game a reflection of the kind of person that he is. In part this reflection emerges because he was forced to sustain focused engagement with Patrick a player who is significantly younger than Craig, white (Craig is black), unathletic and inexperienced (Craig has a long history with the game), and mentally unstable. While Matt and Carl came to the conclusion that the correct course of action was to disengage with Patrick as much as possible, Craig wasn’t so sure. The point is not what answer he came to, but rather that through playing in the game with a total stranger Craig encountered the question at all. Do I continue to pass the ball to a poor player? What kind of player am I? And therefore, what kind of person am I?

In relatively consistent ways many players would use their style of play as a metaphor for the kind of person they are. A player’s cluster of skills and ability is often referred to as his “game” and a player’s “game” is as valid a reflection of their sense of self as just about any other. In the midst of our night league, Tomás was trying to convince me to shoot the ball more.

Drinking beers in a bar, Tomás asked me whether I trusted him in social situations. “Have I ever led you astray Mike? Seriously, have I? Have I ever brought you to a bar or a club or a party that wasn’t a good scene for you?” I told him he had not. “There you go,” he continued, “you gotta trust your point guard. It’s the same way on the basketball court. When I pass you the ball, you shoot it.” Another basketball player who I had just met stood next to us, slapped me on the shoulder, and told me that Tomás was right. “He’s a good point guard Mike. Listen to him.”

Tomás takes pride in his ability to pass the ball. Though not especially talented as a shooter he maintains tremendous vision while handling the ball. He spots open teammates all over the court and is enormously skilled at facilitating situations for them to score. More than any other part of the game, this gives him tremendous pleasure. And he sees in that style of play something more

general about himself. He sees a desire to put people in good situations, to help them have fun and enjoy themselves whenever they come into contact with him. And so on the basketball court and in life people like Tomás. They like being around him and engaging with him because he is self-conscious about facilitating their experience. By failing to take the shot in those situations I was denying him the pleasure of assisting me. In those moments our fates were intertwined. For Tomás to be Tomás I needed to take the shot.

Justin's self-reflection is different. He's a pure scorer on the basketball court and loves to shoot the ball. Though he can make shots that most players at the park can only dream of, he can also become overzealous and shoot his team out of a game with a series of bad decisions. Outside the game Justin is a jokester. He clowns people with word play and breaks into improvisational rap verses which occasionally lead nowhere. But he keeps trying and when his jokes fall flat, Cole loves to let him know. "Oh my god J! Shut the fuck up already your jokes are so bad sometimes!" But Justin doesn't let it phase him. One day on the way home from the park Cole was especially critical of Justin's bad jokes and Justin just told him, "It's like on the basketball court my dude. You can't make a shot you don't take. So I take a lot and I make a lot!" Cole snapped back, "I saw you miss a lot today!" At that point it was no longer clear to me if they were talking about jokes or jump shots.

Though Cole was unimpressed that day, on other days Justin's jokes have made him laugh so hard he's keeled over in tears on the side of the basketball court. "Okay, you finally told a good joke" he told Justin one day after cracking a smile in response to Justin making a mockery of another player's attempts to get into the first game of the day. Cole also admitted to me one day that Justin was easily the best high school basketball player that he personally knew. He could jump, shoot, and score so well that Cole was convinced he would ultimately play in the

NBA. Though Cole sometimes hates to admit it, he knows that both Justin's jump shots and jokes will often hit their mark.

Disputes can also afford moments of existential reflection as well. One day a game was interrupted for several minutes due to a dispute over whether a basket should properly count for one or two points. The rule at the park stipulates that a two pointer requires a player to shoot from beyond the arc *and* for that player or a teammate to verbally announce the word "two!" before the shot goes through the hoop. Julio had made a potential game winning basket from well beyond the arc. His team had 9 points and needed 11 to win and as Julio let the shot fly he called out "gametime!" an indication that if the shot went through the hoop the game would be over. Nobody disputed the location of the shot but his opponents insisted that calling "gametime" was not the same as calling "two". They stuck him with the precise letter of the law. After much disagreement Julio's team returned to the court and ultimately lost the game.

An older black man, Renn, had been one of the main players who insisted on the letter of the law. Between games I spoke to him about the play and told him that I thought announcing "gametime" was essentially equivalent to announcing "two". Renn disagreed, "Look man, I'm just following the rules. Ain't that the rule? It's just a strict interpretation, that's all!" I shrugged, still not convinced. Renn continued, "Look, if I park my car at a meter and I don't pay enough money and I run out of time, I get a ticket. That's it." On this point, I took him up: "But what if you park with your tire just one half inch in the red and you get a ticket. You feel good about that?" Renn cracked a smile, "Well I still gotta pay the ticket! The rule's the rule!" I pushed again, "But it doesn't have to be that way out here! We can do whatever we want." Renn laughed and agreed with me, "We're just making shit up out here, that's true! And you see, that's why I told Julio that I don't feel too good about the win." I looked over at Julio who

was sitting on the sideline shaking his head in dismay as he discussed the situation with another player. Still laughing, Renn slapped my hand obviously having enjoyed our little thought experiment. But after admitting that the significance of the victory was diluted by the law's letter, he walked onto the court to play the next game.

Interestingly, over the next few years nobody has much tried to enforce the letter of this law. While a change in policy has never been articulated the impurity of the moment cast doubts on whether we actually wanted the word "two" to be the deciding factor on a basket's worth. Occasionally when similar disputes have emerged people will recall the situation when Julio was "robbed of a game winner." They point to the spot on the court from where Julio shot the ball, so far behind the line that nobody could doubt that it was "really" a two pointer. But deciding what should count is deciding what kind of court and what kind of game this is and, in turn, what kind of people we all are in relation to it.

So in building and populating the games players find metaphors that reflect universal themes about self, about life, and about society. While the outside world is ignored on the one hand, it is slipped in and experienced on the other. So long as "who will win?" is a real, unbiased, and serious question, the process of finding the answer is rich with self-evocative significance. It is for this reason that Robert Perinbanayagam has said that games, like myths, are "mimetic" narrative structures that present, in miniature, larger themes about emotions, action, and time. While mythical stories afford agents the opportunity to imaginatively cast themselves into the action by identifying with particular characters or situations, in games players experience universal themes together in a common vivid present (Perinbanayagam 2006).

And when the game is organized in pickup fashion the opportunities for existential reflections are even more numerous. The "little cosmos" of the game does not stand constructed

and ready to be populated upon arrival at the park. From different biographical trajectories these men construct the world together so that, for a brief period each day, they can be carried away by it. The intimacy of the landscape, a product of contentious historical processes of which they are hardly aware, stabilizes the public sphere just enough so that they have the raw materials with which to build their world together before scattering back into their separate lives. Having momentarily integrated, they segregate with a better sense of how they fit into the world and how the world fits into them. But always there are plans to re-integrate again. On their way out of the park, each player takes his turn walking past a line of players taking off their shoes. They give one another a friendly hand slap: “Aight fellas, I’m out of here, have a good weekend. See you next week!”

Figure 9 – Photographs From the Park















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