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Open mic
Professionalizing the rap career

Jooyoung Lee
University of California, Los Angeles, USA

Abstract
How do the meanings of a Hip Hop venue change over the aspiring rapper's career? This article draws on four years of ongoing ethnographic fieldwork with inner-city men who rap at Project Blowed, a Hip Hop ‘open mic’ in South Central Los Angeles. While rappers initially view Project Blowed as a place to hone their performance skills and earn the respect of their peers, they hope to move beyond it and make money in the music industry. ‘OGs’, senior rappers, who continue to participate in this scene mentor younger rappers, but may also become examples of the dead-end careers that up-and-coming rappers hope to avoid. This article explores how participants' perceptions of this venue are linked to their changing perceptions of others in the scene.

Keywords
Hip Hop, rap careers, youth culture, South Central Los Angeles

‘CP’ is a 22-year-old male rapper who lives with his grandparents in Baldwin Hills, an affluent black neighborhood west of the Crenshaw Corridor, the main commercial thoroughfare in South Central Los Angeles. Although he self-identifies and ‘passes’ as black, his friends know that members of his family are visibly biracial. Standing about 5’10” and weighing around 150 pounds, CP has a slender and athletic build. Some of his peers think he looks like Nick Cannon, an African American rapper and Hollywood actor. When I first met CP in 2005, he was 18 and had just
started making a name for himself at Project Blowed, a Hip Hop ‘open mic’ workshop in Leimert Park, a black arts district in South Central Los Angeles (Caldwell, 1993).

Each week, aspiring rappers perform ‘writtens’ (pre-composed songs) in front of a live audience at Project Blowed. In addition, ‘turntablists’ (Hip Hop deejays), ‘bboys’ (breakdancers), and ‘poppers’ (funk dancers) also hang out and perform at Project Blowed, which is hosted at KAOS Network, a community center in Leimert Park (Caldwell, 1993). On most Thursday nights, CP arrived around 10 p.m. and parked his Honda Civic on the street corner outside of Project Blowed. With the custom ‘Lambos’ (Lamborghini doors) of his car flipped up, he played instrumental Hip Hop beats from his car stereo. Each week, crowds of rappers flocked to his car and ‘freestyled’, improvising raps into the early morning hours.

After two years as a regular participant and occasional host for the open mic at Project Blowed, CP stopped coming around regularly. On the few nights that he showed up, he stayed for a short time and did not play beats from his car for other rappers. One night, I caught up with him on a rare visit to ‘the Blowed’, participants’ name for this venue. I recorded our exchange in fieldnotes:

CP tells me, nonchalantly, ‘I just got back from the studio’. I tell him that ‘the Blowed’ was especially dead tonight, especially without his car bumping music for people to rap over. He smiles a little, but then shrugs, ‘I mean, I got love for the Blowed, but I’m on some other shit right now’. He tells me that he’s been writing and recording songs in a friend’s studio and that he hopes to finish an EP in the coming months (an extended play record, which usually consists of three to five songs). Then, leaning in and whispering, CP continues, ‘I ain’t tryin’ to be out here rappin’ and shit til I’m like 30, like some of these other niggas.’ As he says this, he glances and quickly nods over at Dru and a couple other older rappers who are hanging out on the corner. He explains, ‘I wanna get in (the music industry) and get out … Make some money and get into some other shit.’ Later, CP explains that he’s always dreamed of racing cars and that if he could, he’d like to make some money rapping and invest it in racing cars.

During the months after this conversation, CP performed new songs at other venues, hired a manager, and helped organize and host ‘The Spliff Showcase’, a monthly Hip Hop show in West Los Angeles (see Figure 1).

Other inner-city men experience similar evolutions in their careers as rappers. While many aspiring rappers come to Project Blowed to develop their individual style and hone their performance skills, some eventually want to ‘blow up’, a Hip Hop term for achieving stardom and making money in the music industry. This transition marks a turning point in the rap career, signaling a change in how aspiring rappers view Project Blowed.
and the peer group there. In contrast, those rappers who do not move on as they age come to be regarded as negative career models; they are perceived by younger rappers as examples of what can happen to an artist if they do not manage their career ‘the right way’. This article illustrates how aspiring rappers’ changing experience of an open mic is linked to the changing ways they see others, particularly older members, in that scene.

At Project Blowed, ‘OGs’ (rappers with the most seniority) act as mentors, encouraging younger performers to professionalize their approach to making music. Although OG is a gang term that translates literally to ‘original gangster’, regulars use the term to describe the most senior members at Project Blowed. Many OGs started rapping at The Good Life, a health food store that doubled as a Hip Hop venue in the early 1990s.1 The Good Life was the main Hip Hop open mic that preceded Project Blowed in South Central LA. In addition to teaching younger rappers performance skills, OGs also give younger rappers career advice on how to organize their attempts to ‘blow up’. Many have personally experienced and witnessed failed attempts at breaking into the music industry and know what can happen to promising rappers who do not professionalize their approach to rapping. However, OGs also play an unwitting role in this venue. Some aspiring rappers are skeptical of the advice from older rappers who still hang out at the open mic and regard OGs as examples of what they do not want to become. They see OGs as guys who frequent Project Blowed because they have not ‘blown up’. Similarly, as rappers reorient their lives around ‘blowing up’, they start recording and distributing ‘mixtapes’ (compilations of songs recorded with other people’s beats) and

![Figure 1](image-url)
begin networking with people whom they see as allies in their quest for stardom.

Turning points and peer group hangouts

Sociologists have long used the turning point as a metaphor to examine how individuals change over the life course. Everett Hughes (1971 [1950]) describes turning points as transitions in a person’s social status. Anselm Strauss defines turning points as identity transformations, or moments when ‘an individual has to take stock’ and reevaluate their identity, relationships, and direction in life (1959: 100). Strauss emphasizes how a person’s social relationships shape turning points in their life: for example, coaches help others ‘move ... along a series of steps, when those steps are not entirely institutionalized and invariant, and when the learner is not entirely clear about their sequences (although the coach is)’ (1959: 110). Contemporary sociologists who have been influenced by the Chicago School often employ this metaphor (Abbott, 1997a), using the turning point to explain how people enter and exit different types of occupational careers (Hughes, 1997), careers in crime (Sampson and Laub, 2003), or how couples ‘uncouple’ (Vaughan, 1986).

Building on these concepts, I describe how inner-city youths arrive at a turning point in their rap career that changes their perception of a public hangout and others who frequent it. In addition to encouraging younger rappers to leave Project Blowed for professional careers, OGs become examples of the dead-end careers that aspiring rappers hope to avoid. In this way, youths’ perceptions of Project Blowed are connected with their shifting understandings of their peers in that place.

My study adds to ethnographic work that shows how urban youths use street corners, parks, taverns, cafeterias, and other public places as central hangouts in the inner city. These studies provide valuable insights into how the meanings of a local hangout change over an individual’s life. For example, Herbert Gans describes how members of male peer groups in the West End, an Italian enclave in Boston, leave streetcorners when they get married (1962). In describing the world of African American men who hang out on a corner in Washington, DC, Elliott Liebow shows how a fallout between two men reshapes the social structure of the group, noting that ‘transience is perhaps the most striking and pervasive characteristic of this streetcorner world’ (2003 [1967]: 141). Elijah Anderson describes the sociability outside of Jelly’s tavern on Chicago’s Southside as a place where inner-city men can ‘be somebody’ and gain the respect they are seldom accorded elsewhere (1978: 18–20). After the death of ‘Bobby’, a ‘winehead’ with a troubled past, members ‘take time to pause and ponder the person and the
group itself")(1978: 183–4). Mitchell Duneier’s *Slim’s Table* (1994) illuminates how a group of middle-aged African American men create a collective life at Valois, a cafeteria in Hyde Park near the University of Chicago. Duneier’s story of Willie, an older regular known as the ‘man in the pink suit’, illustrates how people may come to feel marginalized or ‘kicked out’ of a place. Willie interprets an employee’s request that he ‘give up his seat’ on a particularly busy day as a grave offense and soon relocates to a nearby Wendy’s (1994: 31–3).

Major life transitions and more mundane strains on social relations among members change the ways individuals make sense of a peer group hangout. Building on these insights, my study reveals a parallel process: As they mature, individuals may come to see a once-cherished hangout as ‘old news’ and link continued time at that place to a future self they do not want to become. In effect, they see themselves being seen by future generations as the people who hung around for too long and got stuck at the hangout. Younger rappers initially regard Project Blowed as a place to develop skills and earn the respect of peers, but those who want to ‘blow up’ eventually come to see sustained time hanging out there as a symbol of not making it.

**Fieldwork at Project Blowed**

I began participating in and observing routine activities at Project Blowed in the winter of 2004. In many ways, Leimert Park is the center of black arts in South Central Los Angeles. In addition to a weekend drum circle at a park fountain, Leimert Park is home to jazz workshops, black-oriented book stores, and stores selling African-style art and clothing. Ben Caldwell, an African American filmmaker and community activist, runs KAOS Network and is respected by many local youth as an ‘old head’ (Anderson, 1999) whose tireless work has helped sustain the arts in South Central’s Crenshaw Corridor. In addition to Project Blowed, Caldwell hosts after-school programs, independent documentary film screenings, and dance classes at KAOS Network (Caldwell, 1993).

On most Thursday nights, I arrive at Project Blowed around 10 or 10:30 p.m. and leave between 2 and 4 a.m., when the last regulars go home. I split my time observing rappers performing ‘writtens’ on a small stage inside Project Blowed (Figure 2) and regulars rapping in ‘ciphers’ – group freestyle rap sessions – and ‘battles’ – lyrical duels – on the corner outside of Project Blowed (Figure 3).

As a turntablist and popper, I thought that I would be readily embraced by regulars in the scene. Although I was not rejected outright, there were occasions in the beginning of my fieldwork when regulars made playful remarks about my racial-ethnic identity. With few excep-
Figure 2  CP (far right) freestyling for Flawliss (left) and Big Flossy (right) next to CP’s car

Figure 3  Open Mike performing a song inside of Project Blowed
tions, most regulars are African American men between the ages of 18 and 30. I am one of two second-generation Korean Americans who regularly attend Project Blowed. The other Korean American, Dumbfoundead, is a rapper in his mid-20s who lives in nearby Koreatown and has known many of the regulars since his teenage years. ‘Lyraflip’, a Filipino American rapper in his mid-20s from Torrance, also regularly attends Project Blowed. The only other semiregular Asian attendee is T-Spice, a Japanese rapper in his late 20s who moved from Tokyo to LA to pursue his rap dreams.

Asian Americans occupy a precarious position at Project Blowed. Unlike ‘Jeet Kune Flow’, a mostly Asian American Hip Hop open mic in Koreatown, Project Blowed is located in a predominantly black part of Los Angeles. Although there are some Latino regulars who identify as Mexican American and El Salvadoran, they too are greatly outnumbered by African American rappers. There are also a few ‘white’ rappers who rap at Project Blowed; like the Asian American contingent, they are in the minority.

As a second-generation Korean American, I initially encountered some racial-ethnic disses during the early months of my fieldwork. On an otherwise ordinary night in 2005, I was standing outside of a rap cipher, bobbing my head along to Simon Says, an African American rapper in his mid-20s, who was in the middle of a freestyle. Suddenly he pointed his finger in my direction announcing, ‘I got Jackie Chan right beside me!’ I remember a small crowd of heads turning to see me standing there fighting back my embarrassment. A few began laughing uncontrollably, doubled over, repeating Simon’s remark. I tried to hide my reaction and opted to brush off the joke as a playful remark within the context of a rap cipher. Regulars at Project Blowed frown upon individuals who lose their cool and cannot stay within the play frame of battles or light-hearted banter (see Lee, forthcoming). Still, this passing moment reminded me of my provisional status in the scene. However ‘in’ I felt, regulars still saw me as a racial-ethnic outsider and from time to time pointed that out to me – however playfully. I took the same approach to moments when regulars asked me if I knew martial arts or when they used racial-ethnic humor in battles against Dumbfoundead or Lyraflip. I brushed off such remarks in an attempt to show regulars that I was ‘down’ (able to hang out) and would not ‘catch feelings’ (take comments too personally).

During the second year of fieldwork, I experienced a turning point in my relationship with regulars that marked a new level of acceptance in the scene. On an otherwise ordinary night in 2006, a caravan of ‘krump’ dancers – a fast-paced, high-energy style of Hip Hop dancing that originated in South Central Los Angeles – arrived on the block in the early morning hours. Tick-a-Lott, a 41-year-old African American who is a legendary ‘pop-locker’ (a style of robotic, fluid, and contortion-driven dance
inspired by funk music) from Compton, emerged from the corner and challenged the krump dancers to a dance battle near the corner outside Project Blowed. While battling the crew of krump dancers, Tick turned to me and said, from beneath a Halloween mask he was wearing, ‘Ay J, you gotta get my back’. Before I could stall, he nudged me into the middle of the dance battle. At first I froze and started clumsily stringing together different moves I had learned from Tick-a-Lott (Figure 4). However, within a few moments, I gathered myself and started ‘hittin’’, a style of popping that involves very aggressive and sudden convulsions of the body. That did the trick. Several of the regulars watching this battle began cheering me on. This battle continued for the next ten minutes, until both sides were physically drained.

After seeing me ‘pop’ and help ‘defend the block’ against outsiders, regulars started warming up to me. Some regulars began referring to me as a ‘Blowedian’, a local name for a regular at Project Blowed. Others playfully recounted the story of this dance battle and did ‘the robot’ when I came around. E. Crimsin, a 25-year-old self-identified ‘Blaxican’ (person of mixed Black and Mexican descent), invited me to make a cameo dance appearance in ‘Fill Your Cup’, a music video he shot at his apartment in South Central Los Angeles. Since then, dancing has become my accepted role in the scene.

**Figure 4** Tick-a-Lott and I practicing a popping routine outside of Project Blowed
After this event, I noticed regulars were not using racial and ethnic humor around me as often as before. Instead, some made efforts to find out more about my personal biography as a Korean American. E. Crimsin, who works as a porter in the international terminal of LAX, started greeting me by saying, ‘Anyunghaseo’ (a common Korean greeting), and frequently tries to impress me with other Korean phrases he picks up at LAX. On other occasions, ‘Stilts’, an African American Hip Hop dancer from The Good Life, and several other regulars talked with me about how Koreans have a ‘hood pass’ in their eyes. A hood pass refers to a level of respect among African Americans living in areas that regulars refer to being ‘hood, a local term that is close in meaning to being ‘ghetto’ or ‘street’ (Anderson, 1990, 1999). Amidst a bunch of jokes about Asians being too scared to come to South Central Los Angeles, Stilts remarked, ‘Man, but them Koreans are hard! They the only Asians who ain’t scared to open up businesses in the ‘hood!’ Once Tick-a-Lott called me to visit him at his security job at a local liquor store. When I arrived, Tick-a-Lott escorted me into the liquor store and announced to ‘Jerry’, the Korean immigrant manager on duty, ‘See! I got Korean friends, too!’ Jerry had a look of mixed surprise and shock when he saw me walk in with Tick-a-Lott. Afterwards, as we hung out in front of the liquor store, Tick-a-Lott thanked me for coming to visit him and mentioned that he wanted me to help smooth over his relationship with Jerry, who fired him a few weeks later for repeatedly being late to work.

This article draws on observations and 25 in-depth interviews with rappers at Project Blowed; some still come to Project Blowed on occasion, but are no longer regulars in the scene. I followed them to their day jobs, performances at different venues, the street corners where they hustle their music and other wares, and to parties and other social gatherings. My field-notes illuminate how the organization of these rappers’ lives changed after they stopped frequenting Project Blowed. Following people as they move away from a corner, tavern, or other popular hangout provides useful insights into the changing meanings of a public place over the course of their lives.

Coaches and career advice

Regulars loosely classify different generations of rappers at Project Blowed around a person’s tenure in the local underground rap scene. While OGs consist of rappers who performed weekly at The Good Life, the ‘Second Generation’ consists of rappers who were teenagers just learning how to rap at The Good Life, or who have been coming to Project Blowed since its birth in the mid-1990s. The ‘Third Generation’ consists of younger
rappers who started coming to Project Blowed during the last four or five years. While most are 20-something, some are in their late teens, and a few are newcomers in their early 30s. I have the most rapport with this group because of our similarities in age and tenure in the scene. I also identify with many of the guys in the Third Generation because they are at a comparable point in their rap careers; similar to my academic hopes, many rappers in the Third Generation are trying to launch their careers in the music industry.

The relationship OGs have with younger rappers exemplifies what Strauss (1959) describes as a ‘coaching relationship’. Coaches give younger rappers advice on how to hold a microphone properly, how to carry themselves on stage, or how to rap ‘on beat’ with style. While rapping around ‘The Beat Jeep’, a local name for rapper-producer Dibiase’s Jeep Wrangler, Dru interrupted E. Crimsin’s freestyle to tell him that he was not on beat. My fieldnotes show that his message was not heeded.

Dru is standing with his hands on his hips, watching impatiently and listening to E. Crimsin rap. He shakes his head in dismay and interrupts E. Crimsin’s freestyling. He mutters under his breath, ‘Here’s the beat.’ E. Crimsin continues rapping in his somewhat odd delivery, placing an extra emphasis on the last syllable of each word. Dru mutters aloud, ‘Nigga’s (E. Crimsin) all over the place! Here’s the beat!’ He then takes the back of his hand and smacks it into the palm of his other hand, making a smacking noise on every second and fourth count in the beat. E. Crimsin continues rapping, not entirely on beat. Dru then starts shaking his head and turns around, ‘Some of these youngstas ain’t got no style.’ E. Crimsin continues rapping, apparently unaware or unconcerned that Dru has been criticizing him.

Coaches also try to advise up-and-coming rappers on the steps they should take to develop a professional career. Rifleman is an African American in his mid-30s with a squeaky-clean shaved head and a neatly trimmed goatee; he earned his nickname for his rapid-fire rap delivery. Fiery and outspoken, Rifleman does not pull any of his punches when interacting with younger rappers about their career choices. One night in the fall of 2008, Rifleman stood on the corner outside Project Blowed encouraging younger emcees to raise their sights beyond the open mic:

Rifleman is talking with Sahtyre and Alpha MC, two younger rappers at Project Blowed, about a tour that he’s going on in Europe. ‘Nigga, I got all kinds of people out in Germany and Bulgaria and shit. I could live in Germany if I need to! People know about me over there.’ Rifleman then switches gears: ‘Niggas spend too much time out here on the corner. You need to get paid – get yo’ money! Shit, I know some niggas who been out
here for a decade! Nigga, that’s ten years! Ten years, my nigga! Fuck that!
Get paid, nigga! That’s real talk.’ Both Sahtyre and Alpha MC, two African
American rappers in their early 20s, laugh along with Rifleman. After he
stops laughing, Alpha repeats Rifleman, chuckling, ‘Daaaaamn, he said ten
years!’ Rifleman is shaking his head, ‘Shiiiiit, I ain’t playin’ nigga! Too many
young niggas stay out here for too long!’

Although he has not achieved commercial success, Rifleman’s career
represents a realistic set of possibilities to younger rappers. In addition to
touring Europe with other OGs from The Good Life, Rifleman performs at
musical venues in other parts of the US and has attracted a cult following
within some underground Hip Hop circles. He also has an independent
clothing line that he sells and promotes at Hip Hop shows. Younger rappers
believe that, with the right approach and a bit of luck, they might follow
a similar career trajectory.

Other OGs give younger rappers opportunities to appear in commercial
venues. For example, Trenseta is an African American in his mid-30s who
is known locally as the ‘King of Crenshaw’. He is about 5’11” and very fit,
which he attributes to lifting weights and playing pickup basketball daily.
He always has a freshly shaved head; he gets his hair cut every other day at
Millennium Barbershop where he works. On several occasions, Trenseta has
invited younger rappers to perform as his ‘hype men’ at local concerts. Hype
men excite the audience about a rapper’s performance; they may tell the
audience, ‘Put your hands up!’ or direct chants during the ‘hook’ (chorus)
of a song. While I was hanging out with him at the barbershop (Figure 5),
Trenseta reminisced about how his initial experiences as a ‘hype man’ for
Skee Lo encouraged him to pursue rapping as a professional career:

I used to tour with Skee Lo . . . It wasn’t my style of music, but I got a riff
of what it’s like to go on tour, hit tours and have to be up and go to the
show and do this and everything and publishers and all that type of stuff,
and interviews – I was a part of that. I wasn’t the head man, but I was a
part of that, cause I was helping him with the shows, and we was on stage,
hype man and all that, and that’s when I was like, damn, this is for real.
Like you could really be a star.

Now, in a position to mentor younger performers, Trenseta invited CP and
Big Flossy, two rappers from Project Blowed’s Third Generation, to be his
hype men when he opened for mainstream rapper E-40 in downtown Long
Beach.

Trenseta challenges younger rappers to reconsider how they view ‘selling
out’ in the mainstream music industry. Rappers without commercial
contracts, like other unsigned musicians (Becker, 1963; Faulkner, 1971;
Grazian, 2003), tend to think that mainstream Hip Hop music lacks
creativity. On another afternoon at the barbershop, while Trenseta was sweeping up hair, he explained how he mentors younger rappers about ‘selling out’:

I feel a lot of people at the Blowed start to sound alike. They diss the industry, cause that’s what you do when you underground – ‘Fuck the industry.’ Nah, hell nah! That’s what you want! Underground rap started from rappers who couldn’t get record deals. I remember when people were saying, ‘fuck the industry, this is the underground’. It’s cause their demos kept getting rejected by the record companies! So we need to be professionals about this. You know, they didn’t know how to make a ‘hook’. They didn’t know how to format a song. It’s easy to just freestyle and say a whole bunch of stuff, but I tell them [younger rappers] to keep it going and just make a song. It’s hard
to make a song, quote-unquote, with a hook and a verse and a concept, so I tell them to challenge themselves.

After this conversation, CP arrived at the barbershop to talk with Trenseta about an upcoming show in which they were both performing. Trenseta gave CP practical advice on everything from the songs he should perform to get the crowd ‘hyped’ to how they should make a ‘statement’ by arriving at the show in a stretched black limo with female ‘groupies’ on board. Later that week, CP and I hung out at a park near his grandparents’ house in Baldwin Hills. He told me that Trenseta was one of his main influences. He remarked that ‘People say I’m kinda like a young Tren.’ Other regulars pointed out the resemblance in interviews and casual conversations.

Advice from others

Members of the Second Generation push younger rappers to move beyond Project Blowed. ‘Pterradacto’, a 30-year-old African American who grew up nearby and is a younger cousin of Rifleman, started rapping as a teenager during the early days of Project Blowed. After 13 years as a regular, Pterradacto has still not achieved commercial success. He expresses his sense of frustration with the younger guys who are willing to listen to him on the corner. During the fall of 2008, Pterradacto spoke critically about staying on the block for too long:

I've had some of the best times of my life on this block, but fuck the Blowed! Get your money right, nigga. Fuck the Blowed. It's about to be 2009 and niggas need to realize that they ain't gettin' paid off this shit [rapping on the corner]. You can be the dopest rapper out here, and that don't mean shit because who knows about you!?

Finally, Pterradacto declared, ‘I gave this place all that I had and ain't seen one penny from this shit! So fuck the Blowed, my nigga!’ Younger rappers pay heed to Pterradacto’s advice and see his career trajectory as a cautionary tale of what could happen to them if they are not careful with their time and energy.

Rappers in their late 20s and early 30s have a different set of career goals and responsibilities that shape their approach to rapping. Members of the Third Generation offer advice to younger rappers. ‘Open Mike’ is a 30-year-old African American guy who stands around 5’11”, has neatly tied dreadlocks, and exhibits an uncanny ability for freestyling by stringing together multisyllabic words. Prior to moving to Los Angeles, Open Mike had a year of graduate studies in educational outreach. As the oldest member of ‘Swim Team’, a 10-person rap group based at Project Blowed,
Open Mike informally mentors younger members of his group. In the summer of 2008, when Open Mike and I were at a local corner store, he explained: ‘Being one of the older cats, I always try to focus our energies on what we need to do in terms of the career.’ He described telling Dumbfoundead, a fellow member of ‘Swim Team’, that earning a reputation as a fierce battle-rapper does not always translate into being a successful recording artist: ‘It gets you exposure, but it can also be limiting in terms of where you ultimately want to end up; it can make you into a caricature.’ ‘Otherwize’, an African American rapper in his early 30s, was once the winner of the famed annual Rap Olympics when it was hosted in Los Angeles. To win the championship, Otherwize had to defeat a (then) virtually unknown Eminem, who has gone on to become a multi-platinum recording artist and producer. Although the details of Otherwize’s career failures are murky, younger rappers see his path as another cautionary tale of how talent alone does not guarantee commercial success.

Like sports coaches and teachers, older and more experienced rappers mentor younger and less experienced rappers in a variety of ways: helping them improve basic performance skills, arousing and supporting their career aspirations, and encouraging them to leave Project Blowed and try to get paid for rapping. OGs advise them to move from freestyling and battling into song writing, which requires them to anticipate how their music would be received by audiences outside their peer group. Some also offer the uninitiated a taste of opportunities beyond Project Blowed.

Negative career models

Although some younger rappers take the advice that older, more experienced rappers give them, others are more critical of their advice, since most OGs have not achieved mainstream commercial success. For instance, in the summer of 2008 E. Crimsin recounted how he almost got into a fist fight with Rifleman during the previous week. According to his version of the story, E. Crimsin made a passing comment that Rifleman’s shirt was ‘dope’ (cool), but the print would look better in white. This remark got a rise out of Rifleman, who fired back (according to E. Crimsin), ‘What the fuck do you know, nigga!? You been out here for six years and ain’t progressed!’ E. Crimsin explained, ‘I told that nigga, he been out here on the block for 20 years and wasn’t going anywhere. I was like, “You been around longer than Snoop [Doggy Dogg]! We can go around the corner and ask niggas if they heard of Rifleman and I bet nobody raise they hand!”’

This interaction highlights how regulars come to see extended time at Project Blowed and rapping on the corner as signs of not making it. After this conversation, E. Crimsin described his skepticism of critiques that OGs
throw at him: ‘None of them niggas ’cept for Aceyalone have blown up.’ E. Crimsin aligns himself with people who he sees ‘making moves’ (progressing toward career goals) in the local Hip Hop scene. He currently works under the direction of ‘Hugo V’, an aspiring Mexican American music video producer who has worked with mainstream rap groups like Cypress Hill.

Other up-and-coming rappers interpret the continued presence of OGs and Second Generation rappers at Project Blowed as signs of professional failure. Black Soultan, an African American in his early 30s who was once a regular dancer on the R&B show ‘Soul Train’ and who earned a JD degree from the University of Southern California Law School, describes the changes he has seen during his time at the Blowed. Although many talented rappers were seen to be on the brink of ‘blowing up’ when they were younger, they are now seen as reminders of what can happen if you fail to manage your career the right way. During a conversation on the corner outside of Project Blowed, Black Soultan shared his take on people whose careers never blossomed beyond this venue:

A lot of those guys on the corner have been here 10 years. Next time he’s out here, look at Rifleman’s face; you can see the frustration on his face; you don’t think he wonders why he hasn’t blown up? Tren, Dru, all those guys are the same way as well . . . Look at Pterradacto next time. He’s probably the most talented rapper out of all of us. Every time he shows up here, he seems like he’s on the edge of losing it – dude is seriously crazy! Tren has a little barber shop that he runs, but the other guys are holding onto that dream (of making it big). After a while, it’s not even a dream anymore, it’s just become part of who they are. For some of those guys, they like going and performing at the Blowed because it reminds them of the time when they had dreams of rocking a big stage with a big audience. Every Thursday night on that stage is a way to hold onto that dream.

Younger rappers learn more about the older generation’s career troubles through popular media. In February 2008, a handful of younger rappers attended an early screening of *This is the Life*, a film shot and edited by Ava Duvernay, which documents the stories of several rappers from The Good Life. Different artists in the film complain that commercially successful artists such as Bone Thugs-N-Harmony and Ice Cube stole aspects of their rap style and became famous without giving them due credit. After the screening, some Third Generation rappers met up for a post-movie event at Project Blowed. While hanging out on the corner, Open Mike, Dumbfoundead, and others said that the film inspired them to intensify their pursuit of their musical goals. Dumbfoundead was particularly struck by stories of OGs who never ‘blew up’ commercially: ‘I didn’t know about half of the stuff that they (OGs) had to go through and deal with when
they were just coming up. It inspired me to just really put in the time and effort to record, get my songs mastered, and just keep grindin’ (working hard).’

Younger rappers see OGs who have not been successful as negative examples of the kinds of careers that they do not want. Their relationships with more successful mentors and older members of the scene inspire them to view the rap career in a new, more professional light.

**Professionalizing the rap career**

Rappers professionalize their approach to making music by writing and recording music and by performing at different venues. A few hire managers and network with people in related culture industries. Like painters or concert musicians who decide to sell their work (Becker, 1963; Faulkner, 1971; Grazian, 2003; Simpson, 1981), they come to understand rapping as a possible source of income. Two individuals’ stories illustrate how aspiring rappers reorganize their lives and distance themselves from Project Blowed.

Big Flossy is a 25-year-old African American who lives around the corner from Project Blowed. He is about 6’0” and weighs close to 270 pounds. He got his nickname from peers who liked his ‘flossy’ [flashy] roller-skating style at World on Wheels, a South Central rink he frequents. At the beginning of my fieldwork, Big Flossy was a regular on the corner; he showed up on most Thursday nights around 11 p.m. and hung out into the wee hours on Friday. Before long, Big Flossy outgrew Project Blowed and began professionalizing his approach to making music.

In 2007, after performing at a lowrider convention in Los Angeles, Big Flossy and his younger cousin, Wildchild, who call themselves ‘Prime Time Playaz’ (PTP), were approached by ‘Big Dwight’, a 41-year-old African American from Compton, who owns a car wash and produces and distributes DVDs. Seeing potential in PTP, Big Dwight made them a proposition: help me run my car wash and I’ll manage your career and help promote your music. In exchange for their labor, Big Dwight helped them get discounted recording time in professional studios and allowed them to hock their CDs at the car wash. With the help of Big Dwight’s cameraman, PTP shot a music video on location for ‘Whut it Whut it do’, a single from their forthcoming album.6 Big Flossy and Wildchild started networking with investors who could help fund the production and promotion of their album.

One afternoon in the spring of 2008, Big Flossy invited me to a small barbecue PTP was holding at a cell phone store in South Central Los Angeles. Afterwards, I recorded my impressions:
I’m surprised to see BF and WC decked out in fancy clothes. BF is sporting a blazer, blue-and-white striped collared shirt, jeans, and some shiny Stacy Adams shoes. He also has a blue Los Angeles Dodgers hat turned slightly to the side. Not to be outdone, WC has a black sport coat, tan-colored shirt with the collar flipped out, jeans, a black hat with a hemp leaf on the front, and some shiny Stacy Adams dress shoes. I walk up and joke about how they look like ‘big ballers’. They laugh along with me and grab their collars. BF is especially pleased, ‘You know? We tryin’ to do it big, my nigg.’

BF then tells me they’re approaching rapping as businessmen.

Usually, we’re the rappers and that’s basically it and all, you know what I’m saying? We do our songs and that’s the part of the rapper, right? Now we’re actually doing the part that’s more to it, and that’s the business part – communicating with rich folks and stuff. People that got money, and telling them, you know, our occupation and what we do. Him jumping on the computers and stuff (pointing to Wildchild), networking, you know, we’re building web sites, the myspace. Look, you gotta get a picture of us.

As Big Flossy says this, he and Wildchild strike a pose together and start laughing. Wildchild chimes in, ‘You already know, my nigg! The dress code is different!’

Big Flossy drew distinctions between the approach he and his cousin have and that of others who have not transitioned away from Project Blowed:

We now rockin’ ‘the gentlemen look’ and talking to people like you got sense and like you ain’t always been ghetto . . . And I’ve always said that that’s the difference between people like me and my cousin, and like for instance, I’m a Pterradacto. You could never see him do this. Going to talk to white folks and million dollar people about, you know, what he do and stuff, cause it wouldn’t work, you know what I’m saying? ‘Cause he believes what I used to think, you know, that it’s Pterradacto and that’s all there is, I don’t care about nothing else, my way or no way.

As Big Flossy and Wildchild began working with a manager and recording songs and music videos, they anticipated how a wider audience would see them and their music. They changed everything, from where and with whom they hang out, to their demeanor toward people outside of their peer group.

Drawing from his experiences hosting the open mic at Project Blowed, CP helped start ‘The Spliff Showcase’, a monthly Hip Hop show in West Los Angeles. He and his production team worked out a deal with the owners of a record store to hold the event there on the first Friday of every month. After a slow start, The Spliff Showcase regularly attracts over 100 people. CP hired a manager, signing a contract with Jason, a 28-year-old
white graduate of USC’s music business school. In addition to helping CP get studio time and the services of his friends who are producers and sound engineers, Jason offered CP career advice. While we were hanging out at his apartment in Koreatown, Jason told me about his plans for CP: ‘At first he resisted it, but I’m trying to get CP into acting and film, ya know what I’m saying? I want him to do stuff with Disney Channel and get more media exposure. I think he has the right look for it, but all of that takes time.’

In the spring of 2008, Jason invited CP and his friend and producer, Vann Clayton, to his birthday party at a swanky bar just off the famous Sunset Strip in Hollywood. CP told me how he views Project Blowed: ‘I don’t go back because it’s like the same reason I don’t go back to high school. Why? Why would I? I already done that and moved on.’ CP pauses for a moment and then continues in a more reminiscent tone, ‘I mean, I still got love for the Blowed, that’s where I came up, ya feel me? Like, I’m a Blowedian and I still rep’ that shit. But, I’m on some whole otha shit now. Like I’ll shout the Blowed out when I perform and shit and let people know that that’s where I got my skills up, but I’m doing bigger things now.’

Rappers who reorganize their lives around professional success move away from Project Blowed. While they are proud of having started out there, they are convinced that continued participation in the scene might limit their horizons.

Conclusion

The meaning of this popular Hip Hop open mic and hangout in South Central Los Angeles changes over the careers of rappers. Project Blowed represents a place where aspiring rappers hone their skills and compete for the respect of their peers, but at a later stage it becomes a symbol of not making it in the music industry. Up-and-coming rappers begin to professionalize their approach, moving from live, impromptu performances to writing and recording albums they distribute online or on the streets. Others begin performing at other venues, which expands their fan base and their public visibility. A few hire managers and start networking with potential financial backers and allies in related cultural industries.

At the same time, some rappers continue attending Project Blowed after they develop professional rap dreams. They frequent Project Blowed because of the lasting friendships and collective life they enjoy there. E. Crimsin explains, ‘The Blowed is like a family. It’s where I catch up with the homies.’ Others come to Project Blowed because it offers them a place to refine and experiment with new styles of rapping. Open Mike remarked: ‘Project Blowed is like a dojo. It’s a place where you come to
keep your skills up to par. There aren’t many places like this, where you can just come and vibe with others who are trying to do the same thing as you.’ Despite the shifts that occur in the meanings attached to this venue over the aspiring rapper’s career, these accounts show that some regulars develop symbolic and emotional attachments that bring them back to the familiar open mic and street corner after they have embarked on the next phase of their career.

This study raises insights into how individuals attribute different meanings to public gathering places over the life course. The turning point metaphor sensitizes urban ethnographers to how the meanings of a public gathering place change over a person’s life course. This approach to peer-group hangouts helps inject change over time into urban ethnographic research (see Katz, this issue). There are many other settings in which people come to interpret a place, a peer group, or an organization as ‘old news’. For example, an aspiring actor may enjoy learning the ropes at a local community theater, but come to see sustained participation in this setting as a sign that she is not progressing toward acting in a television pilot or working in Hollywood films. A stand-up comic may be ambivalent about a long tenure at a local comedy club, fearing that he may never break into a nationally-televized skit comedy show. An aspiring professional athlete or a graduate student may embark on this career with excitement and enthusiasm, but become discouraged by spending too many years in the summer league or as an ABD. Studying the processes through which people grow into, outgrow, or age out of peer groups, gathering places, and institutional settings offers ethnographers an opportunity to explore how people’s perceptions of places change over the life course.

Notes

1 See Ava Duvernay’s 2007 documentary, This is the Life, a film about the Good Life and its earliest participants.
2 Richard Helmes-Hayes (1998) and Andrew Abbott (1997b) describe how key figures in the Chicago School, such as Everett Hughes, helped pioneer a focus on individual biographies and careers in subsequent generations. Both also point out how the ‘Second Chicago School’ initiated a move toward empirical studies of people in their particular social contexts.
3 This style is documented in Rize, a 2005 film by David LaChapelle.
4 In Hip Hop speak, ‘Nigga’ is an informal way of referring to another person; synonymous with ‘dude’ or ‘man’, it is not used in a derisive or condescending way. The term ‘nigga’ is mostly reserved for African Americans in the scene. During my four years of fieldwork, I have only heard one non-black regular, Flako Siete, use the term ‘nigga’ casually in
conversation. The only other person to use the term ‘nigga’ was a non-
regular who was warned for using the term while rapping.
5 For a video of Trenseta performing at The Vault that shows Big Flossy (in
the double extra large white t-shirt) and others on stage with him, see [http://
com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewProfile&friendID=4622359&feature=
player_embedded].
6 PTP’s music video, ‘Whut it Whut it Do’, is posted at [http://www.youtube.
com/watch?v=8U0OcC-X79w].
7 Many residents of the area known as ‘Koreatown’ are Latino. The 2000
census shows that in Jason’s neighborhood, 48% of residents self-identified
as ‘Hispanic’ or ‘Latino’, while 19% identified as ‘Asian’. See [http://
factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=14000US0603721
3401&-qr_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_QTP6&-ds_name=D&-lang=en&-re
doLog=false]. Jason is one of a handful of white residents who live in his
apartment building. ‘Vizz’, an aspiring black actor, is one of the only visibly
African American residents on his block.

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JOOYOUNG LEE is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is a fellow in the American Sociological Association’s Minority Fellowship Program, which is funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. His dissertation research examines the careers of aspiring rappers who dream of commercial success in the music industry. He has broader interests in theories of race and ethnicity, youth and the life course, urban sociology, and social interaction. In late 2009, he will be starting a post-doctoral fellowship in the Robert Wood Johnson Health and Society Scholars at the University of Pennsylvania. Address: 264 Haines Hall, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095–1551, USA. [email: youngjoo@ucla.edu]