

Rap Dreams

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Every Thursday night, young men from South Central Los Angeles hang out and rap at Project Blowed, Los Angeles' longest running Hip Hop "open mic." Some perform pre-written songs on a stage inside the club, while others rap in "ciphers" [group sessions] and "battles" [lyrical duels] on the street corner outside of Project Blowed. During the rest of the week, these men organize their lives around trying to land a record contract. They spend long hours writing, recording, and mixing their demos. Many also promote and distribute their music online or on the streets. In addition to the work that goes into their music, these men juggle the responsibilities of work, family life, school, and other aspects of their personal lives.

My project draws from 3 ongoing years of ethnographic fieldwork, 25 in-depth interviews with emcees [rappers] from Project Blowed, and 70 hours of documentary video footage of live performances, studio recording sessions, and other candid moments with the emcees. Although I introduce different aspects of the Hip Hop career, this paper focuses specifically on how the meanings of this career change over time. How do emcees come to see rapping as a career? What kinds of events and processes change the ways emcees orient to their musical careers? By examining these questions, this paper explores the everyday lives, work patterns, and trajectories of young men in the inner-city.