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Escaping Embarrassment: Face-work in the Rap Cipher

JOOYOUNG LEE
University of Pennsylvania

How do individuals escape embarrassing moments in interaction? Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and video recordings of weekly street corner ciphers (impromptu rap sessions), this paper expands Goffman’s theory of defensive and protective face-work. The findings reveal formulaic and indirect dimensions of face-work. First, this paper shows how individuals use prescribed techniques and other canned resources to overcome embarrassing gaffes in interaction. Specifically, rappers use “writtens” (prewritten rhymes) when they are close to “falling off,” a local term for messing up and stopping abruptly during a “freestyle” (improvised) rap performance. Second, this paper describes how shared pressures to sustain an interaction can lead to collateral face-saving. In the cipher, surrounding peers “jump in” and begin rapping when somebody else falls off. Although this protects the person who is falling off from embarrassment, it is often done to “keep the flow going” in the cipher. At the end, this paper also outlines situations in which individuals withhold face protection from others. These findings point to other social situations in which individuals escape embarrassment with canned resources and through collateral face-saving.

On Thursday nights, young men (and a few women) hang out and rap in ciphers (impromptu group rap sessions) on the corner of 43rd Place and Leimert Boulevard. This corner is just outside of “Project Blowed,” a Hip Hop “open mic” located in Leimert Park, a black arts district in South Central Los Angeles. Each week, participants gather on this corner and “freestyle” (a style of improvised rapping) until someone else in the cipher wants to rap. The person who wants to rap uses verbal (e.g., ‘yo,’ ‘uh,’ ‘listen’) and nonverbal (e.g., touching someone on the arm, head bobbing) cues to signal that they want a turn. The person rapping recognizes that someone else wants to rap and transitions off stage (Lee 2009). Although there is no pre-set length of time participants are permitted to rap, most participants rap between 8 and 16 “bars” – which is what emcees (rap-pers) call individual lines in a song. For example, the following consists of two bars from a song recorded by Flawliss, one of the regulars from Project Blowed, “I ain’t feeling him/his album’s garbage.” Moreover, ciphers can last anywhere between a few minutes and a couple hours, depending on who is rapping and how absorbed participants get into the cipher.

One night in the fall of 2007, General Black, E.Crimsin, Lyraflip, Brotha Nupe, Cyclops, Dizaster, and a few other regulars rapped with each other on the corner. The cipher was flowing smoothly, until Dizaster – a twenty-year-old African-American male newcomer in the scene – started rapping:

“I come with different forms of oil spills, like an automobile, when I sock you in the back of the...
neck, with the glasses of life in my hands…” After these lines, Dizaster begins stuttering and pausing during his freestyle, “...Dirt, uh... stressing... the cathedral... uh... put you through... uh...” He sputters through these last words until he “falls off” and stops rapping completely. Dejected, he then turns away from the cipher and yells out, “Fuck!” while walking out into the middle of the street. Others turn to look at Dizaster, who shakes his head in disappointment and slumps his way back to the cipher. However, before the sudden break in action becomes too noticeable, General Black starts rapping, “Without a threshold, I come cold, still stick, show ‘em how I low, get it up like it was nitro, I ignite those…”

Later that night, E.Crimsin turned to Dizaster and told him matter-of-factly, “You can’t fall off like that, my nigga. Even if you can’t think of what to say, you gotta keep rapping!” Dizaster nodded in agreement, but still seemed embarrassed.

The above excerpt captures what happens when a rapper “falls off,” a term rappers use to describe moments when someone gets tongue-tied, stutters, and abruptly stops in the middle of a freestyle rap. Falling off is embarrassing because it shows that an emcee cannot respond to the ongoing demands of “freestyling,” a type of improvised rapping that emcees value as a measurement of skill (c.f. Alim 2006:92–93; Cross 1993; Pihel 1996). However, before Dizaster’s fall off became too disruptive and noticeable, General Black jumped in and started rapping. While this move deflected the sudden embarrassment away from Dizaster, giving him time to “…[R]egain composure or at least hold on to what he still has” (Goffman 1967:103), it also helped sustain the ongoing flow of the cipher (which continued for the next twenty minutes).

Gaffes, awkward pauses, and other flubs are interactional threats. On one hand, these moments can transform how an individual is seen by others in the immediate situation. Undermining an individual’s cool and collected presentation of self, these passing moments expose discrediting qualities that individuals would otherwise try to keep from others. At the same time, these moments also threaten the organization of an interaction. A smooth and sociable encounter can become painfully awkward for those present if participants do not dodge embarrassment. The person committing a gaffe can quickly become the focus of attention, diverting the group’s collective efforts away from more immediate tasks at hand. Thus, a close study of how individuals escape embarrassing moments in interaction reveals new insights into core sociological questions about how interaction “works.”

Specifically, my data extends Erving Goffman’s theory of defensive and protective face-work. Defensive face-work includes different techniques individuals use to ward off potentially embarrassing moments. Individuals put their best foot forward in interaction and organize their lives around avoiding settings in which they anticipate losing face (Goffman 1967). People also use “protective” practices to help others save face. By downplaying or ignoring a gaffe, individuals help someone else maintain the line they are trying to uphold in interaction (Goffman 1967).

While Goffman provides a useful starting point for understanding how people avoid embarrassment, his theory raises additional questions about how individuals save face in situations they enter knowing that there is a high risk for losing face. Indeed, individuals enter a variety of potentially embarrassing situations, but “risk it anyway” (Schudson 1984:638). Forecasting potential pitfalls, individuals rely on pre-scripted lines and other canned face-saving techniques. To make sense of these processes, I draw from studies on how epic poets (Abu-Lughod [1986]1999; Lord [1960]1967), preachers (Rosenberg [1970] 1988), high-school debate teams (Fine 2001), and other performers rely on formulas, scales, and rhetorical devices to escape embarrassing moments in a performance. These techniques point to formulaic aspects of defensive face-work.

Similarly, Goffman describes how people use protective face-work to save others from embarrassment. The person who saves others from embarrassment is seen as a moral actor; by protecting others from face threats, individuals show that they can be trusted in future encounters. Conversely, “The person who can witness another’s humiliation and unfeelingly retain a cool countenance himself is said in
our society to be ‘heartless’” (Goffman 1967:10–11). Extending these themes, I show how protective face-work can have more immediate (and less intentionally altruistic) sources. Group performance studies provide helpful clues in this direction. During focused group gatherings, individuals build a “mutual focus” and become “emotionally entrained”; this collaboration is visible when individuals work to keep interactions going during a momentary lull (Collins 2004:68–71). For example, jazz players and improv actors work to keep live performances going when another member messes up (c.f. Dempsey 2008; Monson 1996; Sawyer 2001). These findings illustrate how the organization of focused group gatherings can encourage indirect face-saving. In short, protective face-work can also emerge from shared responsibilities to keep an interaction afloat.

Drawing from four-and-a-half years of ethnographic fieldwork, 25 in-depth interviews with rappers who rap on the corner, and 60 hours of video recordings, I describe unique ways emcees escape embarrassment. While my findings emerge in street corner rap ciphers, I use these insights to raise comparative questions about the formulaic and indirect dimensions of face-work in other social settings. These are more general techniques that expand sociological theorizing about how individuals ward off face threats. However, before illustrating how these processes unfold in the rap cipher and beyond, I review research on embarrassment and face-work. Afterwards, I show how insights from performance studies add to theories of defensive and protective face-work.

EMBARRASSMENT AND FACE-WORK

Erving Goffman (1956, 1959, 1967) describes how individuals experience embarrassment when they “cannot for the time being mobilize their [his] muscular and intellectual resources for the task at hand” (Goffman 1956:266). Signs of blushing, changes in an individual’s tone of voice, and tremors are signals that an individual knows they have violated the situated code of conduct (Goffman 1956). These are examples of how individuals “flood out,” a term for moments when an individual cannot sustain the appropriate expressive involvement in an interaction (Goffman 1961:55–56). Similarly, signs of embarrassment alert others that the gaffe, faux pas, or discrediting act does not represent who that person really is in their everyday lives. Indeed, the act may temporarily undermine the cool and collected presentation of self, but leaves open the possibility that this individual will embody a more competent self in the future (Goffman 1956).

Continuing this line of research, Goffman (1967) outlines two types of face-work—defensive practices which individuals use to maintain face, and protective practices which individuals use to help others maintain face (Goffman 1967: 14). The distinctions between defensive and protective practices underscore a recurrent theme: individuals have a shared interest in maintaining face, and under most circumstances, help each other maintain face. Indeed, if individuals were not socialized this way, mundane interactions would be more difficult to stage, and would become a source of stress and anxiety to participants.

According to Goffman’s (1967) theory of defensive face-work, individuals try their best to avoid potentially face threatening encounters. He writes, “The surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face is to avoid contacts in which these threats are likely to occur” (Goffman 1967:15). However, once individuals find themselves in a face-threatening situation, other strategies come into play. For instance, individuals “keep[s] off topics and away from activities that would lead to the expression of information that is inconsistent with the line he is maintaining” (Goffman 1967:16).

Individuals also use protective practices to help others save face. They do this because they hope others will extend them the same courtesies if they fell into a face-threatening situation (Goffman 1967). He writes, “A person’s performance of face-work, extended by his tacit agreement to help others perform theirs, represents his willingness to abide by the ground rules of social interaction” (Goffman 1967:31). Protective face-work takes many forms. In some situations, individ-
uals show respect and consciously leave out details which might challenge the positive claims made by the other person. Individuals may also help organize situations that allow the other person to take up a favorable line in interaction. Finally, individuals may overlook face threatening situations, or acknowledge them but “not as an event that contains a threatening expression” (Goffman 1967: 16–18).

Goffman’s theory of defensive and protective face-work provides a useful starting point for understanding how individuals avoid embarrassment, but his theory raises additional questions about how individuals save face in situations they enter knowing that there is a high risk for embarrassment. His theory does not fully address the face-work individuals use in these situations. Schudson (1984) provides useful clues in this direction. He describes how individuals knowingly enter situations “in the face of possible embarrassment.” The traveling salesman who approaches unsympathetic passerby on the street and the teenager who asks someone out on a date knowingly enter potentially embarrassing situations because of “overriding factor(s)” that warrant risks to their face (Schudson 1984:641). The stand-up comic, pick-up artist, and job candidate face similar scenarios in which they anticipate being “on stage” and judged critically by an audience of some sort. What techniques do individuals use to save face in these and other high-stakes performance situations?

My data show how individuals use prescribed rhymes, rhetorical devices, and other “canned resources” to escape embarrassing moments in the rap cipher. This adds to Goffman’s theory of face-work by pointing to its formulaic aspects. In the following section, I review extant themes in the performance literature, highlighting different techniques performers use to avoid embarrassing gaffes, premature stoppages, and other embarrassing moments in a performance.

**Performance and Formulas**

**Individual Performance**

Continuing the work of Milman Parry, Albert Lord ([1960]1997) analyzes how Yugoslavian poets use oral formulas to sustain a fast-paced performance in front of live audiences. Oral formulas are “a group of words which are (is) regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (Lord [1960]1997:4). While poets use formulas to describe the names, places, and actions in a poem, they also rely on “systems”—which are sets of formulas with interchangeable words and phrases—to narrate different sections of a poem (Lord [1960]1997:35).

Performers in other settings also rely on oral formulas. In addition to advancing the narrative of a sermon, preachers use formulas to think of what they want to say next in a sermon (Rosenberg [1970]1988). Similarly, members of high-school debate teams have rhetorical devices and “verbal tics” that help them meet the demands of debating in front of a live audience. Phrases like “I’m going to say,” “Therefore we can see,” and other scripted sayings provide debaters with extra time to think of what they are going to say next in a round (Fine 2001:34–36).

Moreover, although they do not rely on oral formulas, jazz musicians rely on scales, riffs, and musical formulas while performing in front of live audiences (Berliner 1994; Monson 1996; Sudnow 1978). For example, Sudnow (1978) describes how he learns “diminished scales” and “dominant chords” to help orient his hands to the piano keys (Sudnow 1978:18–28). Over time, he acquires a “stockpile of places to go” on the piano, which makes him increasingly comfortable performing in front of a live audience (Sudnow 1978:28).

While Hip Hop emcees rely on similar kinds of formulas (Pihel 1996), they also face unique challenges that direct theories of face-work in new directions. For example, epic poets aim to replicate and reproduce traditional poems, and use oral formulas to avoid stopping in the middle of a performance (Abu-Lughod [1986]1999:180). Lord (1997:44–45) writes:

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, we must hasten to assert that in speaking of ‘creating’ phrases in performance we do not intend to convey the idea that the singer seeks originality or
fineness of expression. He seeks expression of the idea under stress of performance. Expression is his business, not originality, which, indeed, is a concept quite foreign to him and one that he would avoid, if he understood it.

In addition to sustaining a fast-paced performance, rappers have to maintain the outward appearance that they are improvising on the spot, or in Hip Hop vernacular, “coming off the top” (Pihel 1996:264–65). Indeed, Hip Hop emcees evaluate themselves and each other on the perceived originality and creativity of their music, and thus view “frontin’,” or trying to pretend that one is freestyling, as an “unforgivable sin” (Pihel 1996:267).

Pihel’s work is instructive because it highlights a more general feature of everyday social interaction: there is a subtle artfulness in how individuals use formulas and other canned resources. A close examination of how individuals navigate recurrent moments when they are “on stage,” reveals routinized and scripted dimensions of interaction (Phillips 1992). The trick, however, is for individuals to “sell” their use of canned resources as “natural.” Or, as Alexander (2006) notes, successful performers are able to “…convince others that one’s performance is true, with all the ambiguities that the notion of aesthetic truth implies” (32–33).

These principles work in more mundane settings as well. Pick-up lines at a bar and funny anecdotes in a job interview are more successful when they appear spontaneous from the moment. Canned resources that sound overly formulaic can backfire on the individual using them; if the audience suspects that an individual is relying on canned resources, they may feel that the person performing is nervous, unprepared, or lose interest in the performance altogether. Indeed, with the exception of public speeches and other staged performances in which the audience expects a scripted performance, individuals are generally walking a tightrope in which they use formulas, but also try to make these formulas appear “natural.”

My research develops these insights within a street corner rap scene. Rappers who are able to incorporate spontaneous and unfolding details into their freestyle receive the loudest and most spirited cheers and laughter from onlookers. This paper analyzes how emcees manage the simultaneous pressures of maintaining the flow of a performance, while sustaining the appearance that they are not using formulas to accomplish this.

**Group Performance**

Performance studies also describe how shared pressures to sustain a performance can encourage actions that result in (but are not necessarily motivated by) protective face-work. Indeed, protective face-work can be the indirect result of more immediate pressures to sustain the shared focus of an interaction. These insights are developed in Randall Collins’ (2004) theory of interaction ritual chains. Namely, Collins shows how individuals develop a “shared focus” and become “emotionally entrained” within group interaction rituals. As a result, individuals develop a sense of solidarity and fill in for each other during “embarrassing pauses” and other glitches in interaction (Collins 2004:68–69).

Parallel themes emerge in studies of jazz and improv groups. Drawing from Csikszentmihalyi’s (1999) pioneering work on “flow,” these studies highlight fleeting moments in a group performance in which jazz players “hook up” (Dempsey 2008: 66), experience “ESP” (Monson 1996: 161–63), and create “interactional synchrony” (Sawyer 2001: 37) with one another.

Similarly, this research illustrates different collaborative techniques required to sustain a performance. For instance, jazz players and improv actors follow each other’s “leads.” Improv actors organize performances around the “Yes, and…” rule, a convention in which actors accept and build onto the social reality that the previous actor introduces. Group performers also avoid “denials,” which are moments in which a member does not accept the proposed direction of a performance introduced by another member (Sawyer 2001:55). Similarly, compensating for another person’s mistakes, jazz players help guide the person who messed up back into the appropriate place and tempo of a song (Monson 1996:176).
These studies show how focused group gatherings encourage cooperation, teamwork, and as a result, protective face-work amongst participants. Adding to these accounts, I reveal possibilities for positive face-work immediately following a gaffe. These moments present opportunities for adept and comfortable individuals to shine in the face of another person’s foibles. Indeed, these moments bring into relief Goffman’s comparison of comfortable and flustered individuals: “To conduct one’s self comfortably in interaction and to be flustered are directly opposed” (1967:101). The person who improvises a way out of another person’s faux pas builds positive face in the eyes of others. In a similar fashion, the emcee who “jumps in” when another emcee “falls off” demonstrates a keen ability to improvise on the fly—a skill that Hip Hop emcees value.

HANGING OUT ON THE CORNER

For four-and-a-half years, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Leimert Park, a black arts neighborhood located along Crenshaw Boulevard in South Central Los Angeles. Leimert Park is a center of black cultural and commercial life in the Crenshaw district (c.f. Vargas 2006). In 2000, 93 percent of the population in Leimert Park self-identified as “black” or African American. During the week, patrons from all over South Central visit soul food restaurants, music festivals, barbershops, weekend drum circles, African art stores, jazz venues, and coffee shops in Leimert Park.

The data for this paper were collected on the street corner outside of KAOS Network, a community center in Leimert Park. Founded by independent filmmaker, Ben Caldwell, KAOS Network hosts after-school programs, video-editing classes, capoeira practice, and other youth activities during the week (Caldwell 1993). In 1995, KAOS Network began hosting “Project Blowed,” Los Angeles’ longest running Hip Hop “open mic” workshop. Like comedy clubs and cafes in which aspiring folk musicians play original music for an audience, Project Blowed is a local training ground for rappers who have larger dreams of “blowing up,” a term for achieving stardom in the music industry (Lee forthcoming). Prior to being held at KAOS Network in 1995, the “open mic” was held at “The Good Life,” a natural food store in South Central. Every Thursday night young men (and a few women) come together, hang out, and rap at Project Blowed. Some perform “writtens” [prewritten songs] inside the club, while others rap in “ciphers” [spontaneous group sessions] and “battles” [lyrical duels] on the street corner outside of KAOS Network (Lee 2009). After the inside room of KAOS Network closes, many of the regulars move to the corner. On any given Thursday, there are between 20 to 100 participants hanging out and rapping on this corner. Unlike the prewritten songs individuals perform inside of Project Blowed, regulars freestyle on the corner.

There are three main sources of data for this paper. First, this paper draws from four-and-a-half years of participant observation in ciphers and other interactions on the corner. From December 2004 to July 2009, I was a regular on the street corner. Each Thursday night, I arrived on the corner around 10 p.m. and hung out until 2 a.m. the next morning. On some occasions, I made “jottings” on a small notepad that I kept in the glove compartment of my car (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). The following morning I returned home and wrote my observations into ethnographic fieldnotes, which I worked through inductively to highlight variations in how participants organize the rap cipher. I began by organizing my data into recurrent patterns, noting how each example adds to the overall explanation in my paper. I also used “negative cases” to highlight variations and refine my explanations; while coding and analyzing my data, I incorporated unusual and odd cases into my thesis (c.f. Glaser and Strauss 1967; Katz 2001).

In the first few months of my fieldwork, some regulars were suspicious of my presence.

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2 2000 Census Data, Geographic Area: Census Tract 2343, Los Angeles County, California Census 2000 Summary File 1 (SF 1).
3 “Capoeira” is an acrobatic brazilian martial art/dance that is usually accompanied with music and chanting from participants. In most situations, participants dance in the middle of a circle, mimicking that they are in a fight with each other.
on the corner. On different occasions, regulars cracked jokes about my racial-ethnic identity. As a second-generation Korean American, some wondered what interest I had in coming to the open mic, while others playfully referred to me as “Jackie Chan” and “Bruce Lee” (stage names for two Chinese martial arts stars) while rapping. While I was initially taken aback by such comments, I soon realized that these nicknames indicated some level of acceptance by regulars on the corner. I never got the feeling that these jokes were done with malicious intent. In fact, some regulars occasionally play “the dozens” (Abrahams 1962) with each other, and express that playful teasing is a sign that regulars are comfortable around you.

After a few months, I established rapport with “Tick-a-Lott,” a 41-year-old street dancer/merchant from Compton who regularly dances on the corner.

During this period, Tick-a-Lott taught me different styles of “popping” [a robotic and funk-inspired Hip Hop dance]. This dance mentorship helped me develop rapport with many of the other regulars. Although I did not rap, regulars saw that I was into Hip Hop and was “bringing something to the table.”

My relationship with regulars improved dramatically after a fateful night in the fall of 2005. On an otherwise ordinary night on the block, I battled alongside Tick-a-Lott and another regular, “Black Soultan,” against “krump” dancers. This event became part of the local folklore on the corner. Some regulars talked about how I “got down” [danced] and helped “defend the block” from outsiders. This event and my popping more generally opened several doors for me in the field. After realizing that I could pop, regulars started inviting me to parties and other informal get-togethers. Others started playfully greeting me by doing “the robot” and “moonwalk” on the corner. Another regular, E.Crimsin, asked me to dance in an unreleased music video for “Fill Yo’ Cup,” a single from his first album.

Second, after gaining rapport with regulars, I started videotaping ciphers on the corner. To date, I have compiled over 60 hours of videotape footage from the corner. These videos capture interactional details that are difficult to record in fieldnotes (c.f. Goodwin 2000; Katz 1999). For example, live videos of rap ciphers allow me to transcribe what participants rap about, nonverbal communication between performers and audience members, and the moment-by-moment emotional reactions of performers and audience members. Although video cameras can shape how people interact with one another, they are fairly common on this street corner; many regulars have friends videotape them performing inside of Project Blowed or on the corner. Cell phones and other handheld devices have made video-recording a central part of how underground emcees and fans experience a live performance. Likewise, Ben Caldwell is an independent documentarian who sometimes lends his personal video camera to regulars for filming ciphers and battles on the corner.

Third, this paper draws from 25 in-depth interviews with regulars from the street corner. These interviews took place at the interviewee’s homes, local fast-food restaurants, neighborhood stoops, backstage at concerts, in recording studios, or at Leimert Park. The interviews lasted anywhere from one to two hours and focus on people’s biographies in hip hop and their experiences rapping on the corner. For example, I asked respondents to describe how they coordinate turns rapping with each other, with whom they rap, how they know that someone is trying to rap, and strategies they use to avoid falling off.

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4 Tick-a-Lott routinely performs on stage with emcees inside of Project Blowed. On other occasions, he performs without emcees. I shot the following clip in 2005. Tick-a-Lott wore one of his many dancing costumes in this clip: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzmaqDHQ1q0&feature=channel_page.

5 See Rize, a documentary about “Krumpin’” by David LaChappelle (2005). In short, “krumpin’” is a fast, twitchy style of Hip Hop dance where participants twist and contort their torsos, arms, and legs in a rapid frenzy. The most popular dancers look like they are having rhythmic convulsions and seizures.

6 I received permission from most emcees to use their stage names in my work. In cases where I did not receive permission, I indicate that I am using a pseudonym in the body of the text. These procedures comply with my IRB protocol #G06-03-018-03.
Following Duneier (1999), I showed video data and fieldnotes to select individuals from the corner. In particular, Big Flossy, an African American man in his mid-twenties, and Open Mike, an African-American man in his early thirties, offered several incisive critiques of my initial analysis. Their reflections and insights have helped me reshape parts of my analysis on how emcees experience and overcome “falling off.”

FREESTYLING ON THE STREETS

Regulars at Project Blowed take freestyling seriously. “Aceyalone,” “Myka 9,” “P.E.A.C.E.,” “Rifleman,” and other “OGs” (senior emcees in the scene) who came out of “The Good Life”—the open mic that preceded Project Blowed—pioneered freestyling on the west coast of the United States in the 1990s (c.f. DuVernay 2008). In addition to introducing “chopping” (a rapid and syncopated style of rapping), OGs created a scene that places freestyling, creativity, and style over commercialism, being “street,” and acting gangsta, which are themes popularly associated with Hip Hop music (c.f. Kubrin 2005; Lena 2006). Newer generations of Project Blowed emcees carry this tradition and informally rank each other on how well they can freestyle.

Although there is no universal formula for what emcees at Project Blowed consider good freestyling, regulars generally value lyrical complexity, delivery (locals call it “riding the beat”), and humor. Most importantly, emcees win the respect of their peers when they are able to incorporate spontaneous and unpredictable events from the immediate situation into their freestyle. This is the easiest way to demonstrate that one is improvising in the moment. For example, “Flawliss” is a 27-year-old African-American emcee who regularly raps on the corner outside of Project Blowed. He has neatly tied dreadlocks, a trimmed goatee, and is known locally for his intricate rhyme patterns and extensive vocabulary. In 2005, Open Mike and I met up at a small mom and pop restaurant in Leimert Park for an interview. During the interview, he told me about his personal biography, how he got into rapping, and how he freestyles:

OM: I’ve been freestyling since like ‘96, it’s about to be like 10 years—ya know, you start thinking in rhyme to a degree, and like...like right now, even sometimes when I’m talking, when I’m talking, I’m hearing the last syllable that I say and some part of my mind is thinking of some word I can rhyme with it, and after awhile you get to this point where, you seen just about every syllable chain at least once. Ya know, and so even if it’s not something you’ve written, you kinda start to get a catalog of words that rhyme with other words. Ya know, so what becomes new is how you put them together. The stuff in between, ya know.

J: That’s really interesting... So if I said the word “down”?

OM: Yeah, you get frown, drown, clown, you know, mounds, pounds... you know, my thing now though is like how many syllables can I do? So you get syllable, your fillable, lyrical, ya know? Just, ya know, trying to stretch it out like that, because that’s when it sounds real good. Just like, get out there and do freestyle for like 5 syl-
lables, ya know what I’m saying? That’s when the sentence is like real potent.

Over time, emcees acquire a catalog of rhyming words and begin thinking in rhyme, an experience that performers from different oral traditions report (c.f. Abrahams 1962; Lord 1997; Pihel 1996:253). This becomes especially evident after I prime Open Mike to rattle off words that rhyme with the word “down.” Without hesitation, he lists off a catalog of different words – frown, down, clown, mounds, pounds – that all rhyme with “down.”

Others, like “Verbs,” a 22-year-old biracial male from Culver City, CA, take a deliberate and methodical approach to learning how to freestyle. When I first met Verbs in 2005, he was just getting into freestyling and was starting to make a local name for himself at Project Blowed. While hanging out on the corner, Verbs told me about how he develops word associations that he later uses while freestyling:

I go home every day, and I’ll like find a page in the dictionary and start writing out a bunch of words. Then I’ll try to write out as many words as I can that rhyme with each of the words. So one day, I might start off in the like middle of the dictionary and just try to find as many words that rhyme with “Row.” The next day, I’ll do the same thing and just keep doing that ‘til I got like a bunch of words that just rhyme with whatever I’m sayin’.

Freestyling is a type of performance that combines improvisation and previously acquired word associations. Nocando, a 26-year-old African-American male from South Central Los Angeles, is one of the most widely respected freestyle emcees from Project Blowed. A former winner of “Skribble Jam”—an annual rap battle that pits the nation’s best freestyle emcees against each other—Nocando described how he and other emcees each have their own set of canned resources: “Everybody, I don’t care who you are, or how dope you think you are, everybody falls off now and then, it’s just, I mean, it’s part of freestyling. Everybody has their ‘go-tos’ and ‘pre-meds’ (premeditated rhymes).” And yet, although Nocando and several other emcees at Project Blowed acknowledge that freestyling is a combination of pure improvisation and prescribed rhymes, there is a local pressure to sustain the appearance that one is improvising in the moment. Formulas and other canned resources are a “dirty secret” amongst emcees at Project Blowed. This becomes more apparent when we look at different strategies emcees use to avoid “falling off.”

USING CANNED RESOURCES

Armed with canned resources, individuals are better equipped to fend off potentially face threatening moments. The pick-up artist and job candidate have opening lines, funny anecdotes, and talking points that help them escape particularly stressful moments in their performance. And while individuals have different canned resources, they cannot use them indiscriminately. To work, canned resources have to appear “natural”; scripted lines that come across as overly rehearsed or formulaic can appear disengenuous and undermine a person’s performance. For example, the pick-up artist may encounter someone who feels that their opening line is too generic, responding, “Is that a line that you feed to everyone?” In short, there is a subtle artfulness that distinguishes successfully and unsuccessfully used canned resources. In the following section, I outline how emcees use “writtens” (preformulated lines), highlighting the different ways they employ them to avoid embarrassment.

Some emcees are careful to not use the same writtens too frequently or around the same crowd, out of fear of being caught. In the following examples, E.Crimsin—a 24-year-old African-American/Latino emcee who wears all black and is known locally for his abstract rhyme style—uses the same rhyming couplets, “You can’t understand that. Like the Dow Jones and the Nasdaq! “ in two different freestyles. The first example comes from a rap cipher early in 2005:

E.Crimsin is rapping to Bobby, Nupe, Savage Terrain, and a few other regulars next to Bobby’s Maroon Toyota Camry. He’s really amped tonight and projects his voice over the beats playing from Bobby’s car, “Super serve, homeboy, spit you out like chew toys! You can’t understand that. Like the Dow Jones and the Nasdaq!
E.Crimsin used the same line in another freestyle, this time in 2006:

E.Crismin is rapping with Verbs, Alpha MC, Sahtyre, and a few others on the curb. Alpha MC is in the middle of “chopping,” a style of rapping where the emcee raps doubly fast to produce a very quickly syncopated style of rapping. E.Crimsin enters the cipher abruptly, “Haaaadooloon! I’m the levitator, serve you now-and-later. Nigga! You can’t understand that, like the Dow Jones and the Nasdaq!”

E.Crimsin uses the same rhyming couplets, within different sequences, at different points in time, and around different people. This is one way emcees conceal their use of canned resources. By spacing out how often they use canned resources, emcees are able to lessen the chance that someone will hear them say the same rhyme twice.

In the winter of 2007, I asked E.Crimsin about techniques he and other emcees use to avoid falling off while freestyling. Like others in my study, E.Crimsin insisted that he did not use “writtens” and instead always “spits frees” (freestyles), a technique that other performers, like preachers, use to frame their performances (c.f Rosenberg [1970]1988: 78). However, after probing him further, he talked openly about other emcee’s canned resources, and also admitted to experimenting with techniques that allow him to think of what he is going to say next before completely falling off:

J: So, what are phrases you use when you’re about to fall off?


J: Do you know anyone else who has go-to lines?

EC: (pauses to think) That nigga Flawless always be sayin’ things like (imitating his loud and shrill voice), “You don’t want it with me!” (laughs). I don’t know, niggas be havin’ they things, my nigga. Like, I’m trying to drag out my words now. Like that nigga, Otherwise, does this a lot. He’ll say like, (imitating the growling and deep voice) “groooooooound and poooooooound.” This gives me a little time to think of what the fuck I’m bout to say next. Or, I might just say, “Fuck it, I’m a freestyle,” or just something that buys me some time.

Like preachers (Rosenberg [1970]1988) or members of high-school debate teams (Fine 2001), inner-city rappers use stock phrases and other rhetorical devices (e.g., dragging out the last syllables of a word) to give themselves time to think of what they are going to say next. Similarly, regulars on the corner are understandably tight-lipped about using “writtens.” Not only is getting caught shameful, but it discredits the positive face-work individuals do to establish themselves as an emcee who can freestyle on the spot.

There are different ways emcees become suspicious that one of their peers is “spitting writtens.” Onlookers grow suspicious of emcees whose freestyles sound too polished and coherent. In this next example, “Dro” (a pseudonym) is in the middle of a freestyle that sounds premeditated. Although some onlookers like Choice, a 25-year-old African-American male regular on the corner, were very impressed with Dro, others like Black Soultan were not convinced he was freestyling and suspected that he was “spitting a written.”

To downplay Black Soultan’s suspicions, Dro publicly announces that he is improvising on the spot:

Dro is rapping acapella to Nocando, Choice, Black Soultan, and I, “My motto is survival, rivals get locked down in the gang modules, members only, killin’ phonies, I got my own homies turnin’ on me, tryin’ to dome me, it’s street prophecy, real’s inside of me, ghetto prodigy, teachin’ lethal philosophies, possibly intoxicated, can’t near nigga fade me, I’m stayin’ shaded, I pack heats like incinerators, meet ya fate like full grown from the chrome, the same nigga ya told on, got rolled on, follow me to morticians like autopsies, I will smash your shit bags like colostomies, run with monster beat, elites and squadrons, breakin’ laws and dentals causin’ major problems.” Although onlookers cheer throughout Dro’s supposed “freestyle,” Black Soultan isn’t so easily convinced. He turns to me while Dro raps and whispers, “Dude can rap, but he ain’t freestylin’. That’s some writtens.” Choice, on the other hand, is completely sold: after Dro stops rapping, Choice offers him daps and exclaims, “Dayum!” Dro daps him back and peering out of the corner of his eye toward Black Soultan and I says, “It’s all free, though, my nigga. Ain’t nothin’ but some free!”
To dissuade onlooker’s doubts that they are freestyling, emcees like Dro announce, “It’s all free” or “Ain’t nothin’ but some free!” Whether this announcement is in fact true is unimportant. Instead, this shows another way emcees conceal their use of canned resources: in some situations, emcees make public declarations that they are improvising.

Black Soutlan is not alone. Emcees listen closely to one another while freestyling in the cipher. Many listen to hear if the other person is really freestyling. In the following example, CP listens closely to one of Flawliss’ freestyles and states that he doubts Flawliss is freestyling:

CP is standing toward the back of a cipher, listening to Flawliss rap. He turns to me and says, “These 16s are really helping Flawliss.”

Confused, I ask CP, “What are 16s?”

CP continues, “Well, Flawliss is a lot like me; he’ll write 4 bars (lines), then actually freestyle, then use another 4, and then freestyle.”

Clarifying his description, I ask CP, “Ok, so you freestyle and then draw from stuff that you’ve already written.”

CP nods along, “Yeah . . . exactly . . . he’s cool and all, but he ain’t comin’ off the top”

Although they do not always “out” somebody for spitting written, emcees listen closely to each other and develop a working knowledge of each other’s preferred “writtens.” When regulars do “out” someone, they do it knowing that it can be devastating to that person’s reputation on the corner.

If an emcee earns the reputation for always “spitting written,” he loses face amongst his peers, who begin to see the emcee as a fraud who tries to pass off “writtens” as authentic freestyles (c.f. Pihel 1996:267). In the following example, “Sheena G” (a pseudonym), an African-American female emcee, accuses CP of “spitting written” while rapping in a cipher:

CP, Sheena G, Verbs, and SS are all sitting in Sheena G’s white sedan rapping with each other. CP is using a line that I’ve heard him say in other ciphers and battles, “As for music, the raps is stupid, fuck fallin’ in love, cuz I’m clappin’ cupid, unless she lookin’ like Stacy Daschle in Clueless, a vibrant thing, but I don’t act like Q-Tip . . . .” Sheena G starts grinning ear-to-ear at first, and then pretends to be writing something with her right hand. With her right hand, she pretends to scribble along as CP raps. This irritates CP, who stops rapping for a moment and insists that he’s freestyling. Sheena G starts laughing now, and asks CP, “Why you spittin’ written?” CP frowns at her and then they get into a heated argument as to whether or not his rhymes are “written” or “off the top.”

A week later, Sheena G, SS, and I were hanging out beneath the awning of the Vision Theater — a performance theater next door to Project Blowed. I asked her about this event and she explained how she heard CP use the “Stacy Daschle in Clueless” line several times before, but had never said anything. She brought it to his attention and he became upset by this. Getting accused of “spitting written” is more dishonorable than falling off.

While emcees use canned resources to avoid falling off, they also develop techniques to hide the fact that they are using them. Onlookers grow suspicious of freestyle performances that sound too “perfect.” Minor mistakes and imperfections do not count against emcees, so long as the emcee does not completely fall off. In fact, it is generally a positive thing when an emcee shows the ability to maintain the overall flow of their freestyle in spite of small setbacks, flubs, and other minor disruptions in their performance. The key, however, is for emcees to make their canned resources appear “natural.” This is accomplished by using premeditated rhymes selectively. Some only use these canned resources when they absolutely need them, while others use them sparingly and around different people. Others publicly announce that they are freestyling or “coming off the top.” Emcees use these declarations to frame their performance as improvised.

JUMPING IN AFTER A FALL OFF

Although adept performers have a variety of canned resources at their disposal, there are situations in which they are unable to deploy them effectively, ultimately succumbing to the gaffe or mess-up. How does this transform the interaction at hand? How do onlookers
respond to these moments? These questions guide the second part of this paper, which analyzes how people respond to another person’s gaffe. Specifically, this next section outlines how onlookers jump in and start rapping after somebody falls off in the cipher. My analysis in this section introduces a more general feature of focused group gatherings: the shared stake in keeping an interaction going encourages indirect face-saving. Participants in the cipher fill in for each other after another person messes up. While this certainly helps deflect embarrassment away from the person committing the gaffe, it is often a more immediate way individuals respond to the shared pressure to keep the interaction alive.

There are different signs that an emcee is “falling off.” It is common for individuals to cover their mouth, turn away from others in the middle of the cipher, start laughing, and make other declarations like “Ah!” “Fuck!” and “Shit!” These are classic signals that an individual is “flooding out” (Goffman 1961:55–61), or in this setting, falling off. This creates an abrupt break in the ongoing action of the cipher. When this occurs, onlooking peers typically quickly “jump in” and begin rapping.

In the following case, “Nocando” falls off while rapping in a cipher. Shortly after he falls off, Flawliss jumps in and starts rapping:

Nocando raps, “…So I say think it twice, and the third time make it predictable (image 1), kick a flow…sinder…mister, rister…” (image 2). He stutters over his words, starts shaking his head side to side, and begins to turn away from the cipher (image 3). Flawliss (who’s standing next to Nocando) quickly jumps in and starts rapping, “Yes that nigga Flaw from the 661, but got guns that’ll fuck up your picnic fun…” (image 4). The onlooking audience’s attention refocuses onto Flawliss:

By stuttering (“sinder…mister, rister…” and shaking his head from side to side, Nocando shows that he is falling off (image 2). These are visible cues that he is having difficulty freestyling. He finalizes his fall off by completely breaking from his freestyle and turning away from the rest of the cipher (image 3). Flawliss sees these cues and then jumps in and starts rapping (image 4). By jumping in, Flawliss maintains the ongoing flow of the cipher and redirects negative peer attention away from Nocando.

In other cases, the person who jumps in uses a line or phrase from the previous person’s rap to transition on stage. In addition to
redirecting negative attention away from the person falling off, this move demonstrates a degree of skill on the part of the person jumping in. Emcees who do this capitalize on another person’s gaffe, transforming it into a personal resource. The most adept show that they are able to improvise on the fly by continuing the previous person’s train of thought and by adopting the same rhyme scheme. For example,

“E. Crimsin” jumps in and starts his rap with the same first word (“Oooh”) that “Verbs” fell off with, and keeps Verbs’ rhyme scheme intact:

In the middle of his rap, “Verbs” begins to stutter (image 1). “Who wanna flow now? I’m a dope cat, though, Oooh…” He stops mid-sentence, closes his eyes, and sticks his tongue out (image 2). He pauses momentarily before turning away from the cipher and covers his face embarrassed (image 3). However, before the break in rapping becomes too noticeable, “Evil Crimsin” – who is standing across from Verbs – jumps in and starts rapping, “Oooh! lasso, like Sasso Will, I kill mutha fuckas with Forman Grills, they get cold and chill.” (image 4)

Verbs does a number of gestures – pauses, shakes his head, covers his face – to show that he is falling off (images 2 and 3). Like the above example, these are all dramatic changes in his orientation to others and the activity at hand. E.Crimsin sees that Verbs is falling off, and then uses Verbs’ last word, “Oooh,” to transition on stage (image 4). He also stays consistent with the rhyme pattern on which Verbs falls off; “lasso, like sasso” rhymes with “I’m a dope cat, though.” In addition to sustaining the flow and deflecting negative attention away from Verbs, E.Crimsin also uses the jump in to demonstrate his skills as a rapper. Indeed, by jumping in with the same word and subsequent rhyming phrase that the previous person fell off with, he shows that he is an adept performer who can improvise on the spot.

Onlookers who are not actively jumping in can also help set the stage for another person’s jump in. Specifically, they help redirect attention toward the person about to jump in, and thus shift the group’s shared attention away from the person who fell off. In the following case, “SS” jumps in after “CP” falls off. “Big Flossy,” who is standing next to SS, provokes SS to rap and thus redirects attention onto SS and deflects negative attention away from CP:

CP is in the middle of freestyling, “…got slugs hittin’ in they chest, ya’ll leave mutha fuckas in
cardiac arrest, know I’m the best…” After this line, CP pauses briefly, says, “I don’t know…” while turning to leave the cipher. Once CP’s back is turned to the cipher, SS jumps in while bobbing his head, “Know I’m the best…” Big Flossy (who is standing across from SS) chimes in, “You the best my nigga? I’m the best my nigga!” After saying these things, audience members who were formerly were looking at CP, turn toward SS, who is preparing to rap, “Ay yo, ay yo, ay yo, ay, ay, ay—know, if you ask a question, ask it right…”

This example reveals another type of cooperation that emerges when someone falls off in the cipher. Some participants set up another person’s jump in. Although SS is the first to jump in (“Know I’m the best”) after CP falls off, Big Flossy helps make this transition work by asking SS a pair of rhetorical questions, “You the best my nigga?” “I’m the best my nigga?!” These questions direct attention onto SS, further redirecting negative attention away from CP.

Although jumping in often results in protecting the face of the person who falls off, this is not necessarily the motivating factor behind jumping in. Interviews and conversations with regulars on the corner show how the shared responsibility to keep the flow going in the cipher propels them into action. For instance, “Open Mike” describes how he jumps in to “keep the energy up” in the cipher, “You jump in because you wanna keep the energy up. If somebody is rapping and they start falling off, that starts to take energy away from others in the cipher. Nobody wants the energy to just die, so you jump in to keep things going.” Others, like E.Crimsin add that they are not overly concerned with peers losing face. Echoing Open Mike, E.Crimsin explains, “I mean, it’s (jumping in) not really ‘bout all that, know what I mean? I mean, I could give a fuck if a nigga’s strugglin’ and can’t do his shit! (starts laughing) I mean, It’s really just a matter of tryin’ to keep the cipher going, know what I mean?”

Both Open Mike and E.Crimsin neatly summarize the immediate call to action when somebody falls off. Everyone present in a rap cipher experiences the awkwardness of another person’s fall off. If participants did not jump in after a fall off, the ongoing activity would come to an abrupt end, for which everyone loses out. These points highlight the teamwork and collaboration in focused group gatherings. Like a group recital or casual conversation, group performances require that individuals put aside their individual differences for the greater good of the performance. A shared interest in sustaining an activity encourages indirect face-saving amongst participants.

**NOT JUMPING IN: DISTANCING AND HUMBLING**

In Goffman’s model of face-work, individuals have a tacit contract to help each other save face during embarrassing moments. Face protection is a moral act; individuals who protect others from face threats show that they can be trusted in future encounters. Although family members, friends, and other close acquaintances look out for each other, there are situations in which people allow someone else to become embarrassed. What are the situations in which people withhold face protection? Why do some people look the other way when another person falls into an embarrassing moment? The rap cipher offers preliminary clues to these questions. These data are important to the overall theory of face-work because they operate like a “negative case” (c.f. Katz 2001), pushing the explanation to consider moments when individuals do not protect each other from face threats. Below, I outline a few of these situations, noting how emcees use silence to humble and distance themselves from another person in the cipher.

Emcees are not as willing to jump in when the person falling off is somebody that they do not respect outside of the cipher, or if the person is not an accepted member of their peer group. For example, Big Flossy, a 26-year-old African-American male who regularly raps on the corner, describes when he does and does not jump in while hanging out on the corner:

See, if it’s one of yo’ boys, then you gonna help a nigga out and start rappin’ if they fallin’ off. Like if you my nigga, then I’m jump right in, like it ain’t no thang. But if it’s some nigga who you don’t really like, or if it’s some nigga who think they tight, but they really wack, then you may wait for a second and let that nigga fall off.
That way, that nigga know that he can’t flow and so he maybe think twice about tryin’ to come in the cipher all proud and shit... Regulars understand the power of silence in these situations. According to Big Flossy, emcees are more willing to jump in on somebody’s behalf if that person is a friend, someone with whom they regularly rap, or someone that they respect as an emcee. Conversely, emcees understand how they can use silence to humble another emcee.

I observed several of these moments during my fieldwork. In the following example, “Crackie” (a pseudonym), an African-American male in his mid-twenties, who is homeless and smokes crack cocaine, barges into an ongoing cipher. Prior to this instance, Crackie had developed a negative reputation for always being high on crack-cocaine. Regulars often excluded him from their ciphers and avoided hanging out with him altogether. Occasionally, however, regulars gave him the floor and let him fall off:

Open Mike is freestyling, “I’ll smash any emcee when I press on the gas, I’m my Altima, I’m stallin’ ya,” when Crackie barges into the cipher, “Ay, ay, ay, ay, hold on!” Open Mike looks surprised and stops rapping, allowing Crackie to have the floor. Crackie starts freestyling, but ends up repeating a series of incoherent phrases, “I got a same song with the same song, I represent mister brother Jones with the same song, I test though with the sess though, I bless bone with the bless bone...” He looks around to others in the cipher while rapping, but no one is impressed. Menacin’ Johnson, in fact, can barely keep a straight face as he listens to Crackie try to string together a coherent freestyle. Crackie struggles to keep his flow going, “A bless bone with the bless bone, a bless bone with the bless bone...” He repeats himself and comes to a complete stop; no one jumps in after him. He finally stops rapping, and starts smiling in an embarrassed way and then hurriedly leaves the cipher. Someone standing around the cipher jokingly yells out, “Crackie’s gone, now we can rap again!”

Although this was the first time I saw regulars allow Crackie to fall off in a cipher, it was not the first time regulars distanced themselves from him. On another occasion, Crackie showed up to the corner with baggy pants that were barely hanging onto his waist. His eyes were blood shot and he was mumbling gibberish, which annoyed people who were trying to rap or listen to those rapping. Then, without warning, Crackie began running around the block and eventually his pants fell around his waste, exposing his buttocks and genitals to others on the corner. He did not seem to notice and regulars began moving away from him as he ran around half naked in the middle of the street yelling to himself. A few regulars murmured how they were “fed up” with Crackie and thought he needed to “lay off the (crack) pipe.” This instance and several others illustrate how regulars use silence, or more specifically not jumping in, to distance themselves from others they do not respect.

Regulars also do not jump in when they feel that the person falling off needs to be humbled. In this next example, “Verbs,” “CP,” “Lyraflip,” and a few other rappers watch “Havok” fall off without jumping in. Prior to rapping in this cipher, Havok fell off in other ciphers. By the time he arrived to this cipher, Verbs and CP had already seen enough. Both were laughing at Havok, holding side conversations with each other about how “wack” Havok was at freestyling:

Havok is in the middle of freestyling. He jumps around enthusiastically, but none of his raps elicit any kind of favorable reaction from onlookers. He pauses from time to time and struggles to maintain an ongoing flow in his rap. “Yo, yo, this is the fuckin’ man, I came to wreck, keep niggas in check, like I fuckin’ do this. I rhyme like a Buddhist, and fuckin’...” Each time he struggles to complete a sentence, CP and Verbs turn to each other and start laughing quietly amongst themselves. After this last line, CP darts away into the street, barely able to hold in his laughter. Verbs, meanwhile, stands by coolly with his hands in his pocket and turns to me, “Nigga is wack (unskilled), man.” I listen closer and see Havok struggling to keep his flow going. Lyraflip and Psychosiz stop by to listen in on the cipher for a moment, and then leave shaking their heads a few seconds later. Havok has been trying to rap now for at least a minute and then starts stuttering mid-sentence. Nobody, however, shows any signs of wanting to rap. Verbs is watching Havok closely, but does not jump in. Indeed, Verbs focuses in even closer on Havok as...
he falls off. Havok falls off and looks embarrassed, as Verbs and a couple other emcees stare in on him.

Later that night, I asked Verbs why he did not jump in when he realized that Havok was falling off. Coolly and nonchalantly, he explained,

“Who? You mean this guy? (starts imitating his erratic gestures and then starts laughing). That nigga was wack and kept rapping in everybody’s cipher. I mean, I’m cool if you wanna rap, but if you’re wack, you shouldn’t be rappin’ so much. So sometimes you gotta let a person who thinks they tight, fall off. That’s the only way they’ll shut up.”

Verbs describes how he does not jump in when he feels that the other person needs to know that they are “wack,” slang for someone who lacks skill in this scene. Emcees strategically refrain from jumping in when they want to distance themselves from another person in the cipher, or when they feel that the person falling off needs to be humbled. These examples reveal tensions between the collective project of sustaining an ongoing performance and individual ways of creating status distinctions on the corner.

CONCLUSION

Adding to Goffman’s theory of face-work, I highlight formulaic and indirect dimensions of face-work. In addition to the general range of defensive measures individuals take to avoid embarrassing situations altogether, individuals come to high-stakes performance settings armed with canned resources. Canned resources are like interactional life vests which keep people from drowning during embarrassing moments. Insights from a range of performance studies show how epic poets (Lord 1997), preachers (Holloway 1992; Rosenberg [1970]1988), high-school students on debate teams (Fine 2001), and jazz musicians (c.f. Becker 2000; Dempsey 2008; Monson 1996; Sudnow 1978) use formulas, scales, and rhetorical devices to meet the ongoing challenges of performing for live audiences.

Likewise, I reveal other ways in which protective measures emerge from focused group gatherings. In addition to protecting others from face threats because they do not want the other person to experience embarrassment, I show how the shared responsibility for keeping an interaction going encourages indirect face-saving. In the cipher, this is visible when one person “jumps in” after another “falls off.” However, closer inspection of how regulars make sense of these moments reveals a more complex picture, in which people describe a compulsion to jump in because they want to save the activity from coming to a standstill. Again, studies on interaction group rituals (Collins 2004) and other group performance settings (Sawyer 2001) provide insights into how group performances inspire cooperation and teamwork; I extend these themes to show how they also facilitate protective face-work.

Canned resources and indirect face-saving are more general interactional processes meant to motivate sociological comparisons. For example, individuals use formulaic lines, fall-back responses, and other canned resources at bars, night clubs, and other establishments in which they encounter strangers for the first time. In each of these settings, individuals know that they will be “on stage” and hope to make a great impression on others. Individuals may come prepared with canned resources to navigate potential pitfalls in interaction. For example, pick-up artists develop a repertoire of successful conversational “openers” that allow them to appear confident to those they are trying to “pick up.” Likewise, during an awkward moment on a first date, individuals may resort to funny anecdotes and engaging stories that worked on past dates. Colorful stories about summer travels and chance encounters with a celebrity are stock methods for generating interest and lively conversation with another person.

Canned resources also help people engage in more “serious” matters. During an interview, a job candidate may fall back on a scripted introduction in which she highlights many of the best qualities about herself. Questions like, “What makes you the right candidate for this job?” may trigger a carefully scripted and rehearsed response in which the candidate outlines their educational back-
ground, previous work experiences, and unique character that makes them the ideal candidate. Successful PhD candidates are also masterful at using canned resources. After a few practice job-talks, candidates know how to field tough questions about their dissertation. The otherwise unsettling theoretical or methodological dilemmas become easily manageable, adding to the attractiveness of a job candidate. In these preliminary examples, individuals use canned resources to bail themselves out of potentially embarrassing flubs and gaffes in a high-stakes performance.

The trick for using canned resources is that they have to appear “natural.” The individual who falls back on their canned resources indiscriminately may come off looking nervous, overwhelmed, or altogether unprepared. Anyone who followed the 2008 presidential campaign may remember Gov. Sarah Palin’s painfully awkward interview with CBS news anchor, Katie Couric. Palin stuck to her talking points during the interview, which made her appear flustered and unprepared for the vice presidential nomination. Future studies may document the range of situations in which people use canned resources and the artful ways they put them to use.

My study also opens a discussion on indirect face-saving. This focus complements the existing emphasis on how family members, friends, and associates look out for each other during embarrassing moments. Adding to a broad range of morally laden situations in which people protect each other from face threats, I show how some situations encourage behaviors that result in (but are not necessarily motivated by) protective measures. Again, comparisons can be drawn with a variety of social settings. Mundane social encounters illustrate how indirect face-saving works. For example, people participating in group conversations at a cocktail party know that there are abundant sources for embarrassment. An individual may stutter and lose their train of thought during a conversation. When this happens, someone may start a new line of conversation, continue where the person left off, or lighten the mood by cracking a joke. While these moves deflect negative attention away from the person who initially stuttered, they are also ways that individuals respond to sudden breaks in the ongoing rhythm and flow of social interaction. Awkward pauses in interaction are not only embarrassing for the person who lost their train of thought, but also uncomfortable for others present.

Similar kinds of indirect face-saving emerge in more colorful encounters. During a cocktail party someone may spill their drink on the floor or accidentally unplug an Ipod from a stereo system. Both moments can create an abrupt break in the ongoing flow of the situation. In both of these situations, surrounding individuals may cut the tension by yelling out, “Party Foul!” or if they are particularly savvy, continue humming the song that was interrupted by the technological problem. While these moves help the person at fault save face, they are also ways that onlookers cut tensions that emerge in a situation that they have a stake in maintaining. Similarly, these situations also show how the person who improvises a way out of these embarrassing moments looks good as a result. These are initial provocations for further research on the multiple ways people improvise their way out of embarrassing moments. Illustrating what is common and what is unique about how individuals escape embarrassing moments will provide a more nuanced theory of how seemingly minor gaffes and flubs propel others into action.

Finally, I also raise questions about how individuals withhold face protection from each other. My data illustrates different moments in which people look the other way when someone is falling into embarrassment. Silence, in these cases, becomes a powerful shaming device. In the rap cipher, individuals remain silent and do not jump in when they want to distance themselves from the person falling off, or if they feel that the person falling off needs to be humbled. What are the other ways in which people use silence to distance themselves from others? How does silence humble others? A cursory look at other social settings provides interesting leads that others can take up. For example, individuals use silence to align and distance themselves with others in more mundane settings. When
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asked how members of a small group feel about a person under question, dissenting members may respond with “No comment” or remain completely silent on the topic. These moves signal loud and clear the negative feelings that silent members of the group harbor toward the person under question.

Silence can also be unnerving and uncomfortable in social gatherings because it eliminates the joint focus of attention, exposing the fact that people may have very little to say to one another or next to nothing in common. Goffman writes, “Undue lulls come to be potential signs of having nothing in common, or of being insufficiently self-possessed to create something to say, and hence must be avoided” (1967:36). Indeed, sudden and unexpected silences create a void in interaction that highlights the absence of common interests amongst participants. Silence is a key aspect of interaction, and raises interesting possibilities for future research. Tracing the different ways individuals use and respond to silence will add new dimensions to studies of interaction.

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