

# The Rhetoric of Rap: A Challenge to Dominant Forces?

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## Abstract

For more than a decade, hip-hop culture and rap music has been of particular interest to scholars in the social sciences. One noteworthy contribution is Potter's (1995) analysis of hip-hop culture which draws on postmodern social theory to argue for rap music's status as a model resistance; a challenge dominant forces. For Potter, the African-American vernacular is a fundamental part of this 'resistance'. Unfortunately, given his orientation towards cultural studies, Potter does not provide any empirical linguistic evidence to support his claims. As a contribution to Potter's research, this paper performs a linguistic analysis of a small corpus of African-American rap songs. From Systemic Functional Linguistics, the Appraisal system of Engagement is used to investigate the ways in which rappers 'engage' with the values expressed in their lyrics. Drawing on Bakhtin's dialogics, the Engagement findings are also interpreted as intersubjective devices used by African-American rap artists to align themselves with a particular community, and at the same time, distance themselves from others. In this way, it is expected the findings will help reveal the extent to which rap lyrics do, or do not, 'challenge' dominant forces.

## 1 Introduction

Since the emergence of rap music in the late-1970s, scholars have become increasingly interested in not only rap music, but also the hip-hop culture from which it derives (Rose 1994, Walser 1995, Krims 2000, Keyes 2002, Mitchell 2002). Watkins suggests that hip-hop culture and rap music are of particular interest because they lend themselves to a variety of disciplines: "[it] intersects with many aspects of contemporary life—technology, pop culture, linguistics, globalisation, geography, race..." (Watkins 2005: 244). A key contribution to this growing interdisciplinary canon is Potter's (1995) book-length publication *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. Potter draws on cultural studies to investigate the extent to which rap music may model the kinds of processes described in postmodern social theory. Potter basically argues that hip-hop is representative of postmodernism "for its ability at breaking, fragmenting, or 'signifying' on time" (Keyes 1999: 179-180). Potter is particularly interested in the role of language:

If there is a field in which hip-hop's revolution will be fought, it will be first and foremost that of language, a fact which is underlined by the recurrent metaphoric mixture of rappers' own technologies (microphones, pencils and tongues) with those of armed struggle (guns, hand grenades, artillery)... Can linguistics provide a kind of model for the tactics and effectivity of the kind of cultural resistance staged by hip-hop? (Potter 1995: 64)

In short, Potter argues that the 'hip-hop vernacular' as part of the African-American vernacular, is a tool of resistance; something that can not only subvert, but transform the 'hegemonic utterance' of the dominant forces. Krims summarises Potter's work as follows:

[Potter] argues persuasively for [rap music's] status as a model resistance by the standards (of among other things) Bakhtin's dialogics and de Certeau's heterologies, arguing that African-American vernacular cultures have long been, and continue to be, sites of discursive challenge to dominant forces (Krimm 2000: 8).

Given Potter's orientation towards cultural studies, he does not include an empirical linguistic analysis of rap music to substantiate his thesis. This paper hopes to contribute to Potter's research by performing a discourse analysis of a small corpus of North American rap music. Through the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Appraisal (Martin and White 2005), this paper aims to describe the interpersonal meanings expressed in rap music. In particular, the Appraisal system of Engagement will be applied to the data so as to investigate the ways in which rap lyrics 'engage' with other speakers and their respective value positions:

We are interested in whether they [speakers/writers] present themselves as standing with, as standing against, as undecided, or as neutral with respect to these other speakers and their value positions... Thus we are [also] interested in whether the value position is presented as one which can be taken for granted for this particular audience, as one which is some way novel, problematic or contentious, or as one which is likely to be questioned, resisted or rejected. (Martin and White 2005: 93)

Following Bakhtin's dialogics, the Engagement findings will be interpreted as intersubjective devices used rhetorically by the African-American rap artists to align themselves with a particular community, and at the same time, distance themselves from others. It is the hypothesis of this paper that rappers will distance themselves from the values of the dominant forces. Moreover, it is expected that the African-American rappers will use Engagements resources to counter, challenge and ultimately 'close down' the perspectives and values of the dominant forces.

## 2 Data

The data has been sampled from the *All Music Guide to Hip-Hop: The Definitive Guide to Rap and Hip-Hop* (Bogdanov, Woodstra, Erlewine, Bush 2003) which is essentially an encyclopaedia of rap music. It provides reviews of all the noteworthy rap artists and recordings from the late-1970s to the early-2000s, as well as essays, biographies and genealogical maps that trace the history of rap music. The data set sampled for this paper has been extracted from Bogdanov et al.'s (2003) list of 'Essential Songs' which is further classified according to various styles or sub-genres of rap music, such as: political rap, gangsta rap, hardcore rap, old-school rap and party rap.

In total, a small corpus of 15 rap songs by African-American artists was sampled from Bogdanov et al. (2003). The set was further divided into 3 sub-sets according to the following styles: gangsta rap, hip-hop rap and political rap. The data set is intended to be representative of African-American rap music generally and not a comparative study of styles of North American rap music. Those 3 styles were chosen mainly because they are quite distinct and therefore represent the diverse range of styles that comprise the rap music genre. The following extracts taken from Bogdanov et al. (2003) provide a simple introduction to the themes, music and cultural context that

characterises each of these rap music styles, beginning with gangsta rap, hip-hop rap and then political rap:

Gangsta Rap developed in the late '80s. Evolving out of hardcore rap, gangsta rap had an edgy, noisy sound. Lyrically, it was just as abrasive, as the rappers spun profane, gritty tales about urban crime...

In the terminology of rap music, Hip-Hop usually refers to the culture – graffiti spraying, breakdancing, and turntablism in addition to rapping itself surrounding the music. As a style, however, hip-hop refers to music created with those values in mind...

Looking to move on from the block-party atmosphere of old school rap and eager to vent their frustrations with the '80s version of the inner-city blues, a select few hip-hop groups merged deft rhymes with political philosophy to create a new style of rap. (Bogdanov et al. 2003: viii-ix)

5 songs were extracted from those respective styles, providing a total of 15 rap songs. Table 1 classifies the 15 rap songs according to style, artist and song title (see Discography for full details):

**Table 1:** The Data: 15 North American Rap Songs

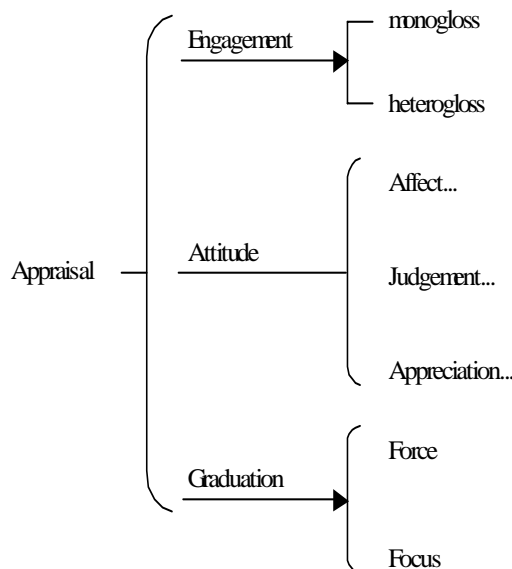
Artist	Title
<b>Gangsta Rap</b>	
Ice Cube	Steady Mobbin'
Ice T	New Jack Hustler
The Notorious B.I.G.	Ready to Die
NWA	Gangsta Gangsta
Snoop Dogg	Gin and Juice
<b>Hip-Hop Rap</b>	
Beastie Boys <sup>1</sup>	So What'cha Want
Kurtis Blow	The Breaks
Jay-Z	Hard Knock Life
LL Cool J	I Can't Live Without My Radio
Run-D.M.C.	It's Like That
<b>Political Rap</b>	
Arrested Development	Everyday People
The Disposable Heroes...	Television, The Drug of the Nation
Grandmaster Flash...	The Message
Public Enemy a	911 is a Joke
Public Enemy b	Fight the Power

The rap lyrics were accessed from the *Original Hip-Hop Lyrics Archive* <[www.ohhla.com](http://www.ohhla.com)>. Those transcriptions were reformatted, checked for errors and then transcribed to the level of the clause. Subordinate clauses were sometimes analysed separately when they expressed both Attitude and Engagement values independent of the main clause. The Appraisal system networks of Attitude and Engagement were applied to the data in line with a basic set of Appraisal conventions (see List of Appraisal Conventions).

<sup>1</sup> The Beastie Boys are *not* African-American although they are very much part of hip-hop culture.

### 3 Method of Analysis

Lead by Martin (e.g. Martin 2000, Martin and Rose 2003, Martin and White 2005), Appraisal is an analytical framework designed to identify evaluation in language and comprises three main sub-systems: Attitude, Graduation and Engagement. The basic overview of the Appraisal system network is illustrated in Figure 1:



**Figure 1:** An overview of Appraisal resources (after Martin and White 2005: 38)

Appraisal is a superordinate term that deals with “the semantic resources used to negotiate emotions, judgements and valuations, alongside resources for amplifying and engaging with these evaluations” (Martin 2000: 145). With respect to the Appraisal systems, Attitude concerns the semantic resources used to negotiate emotions, judgements, and valuations while Graduation and Engagement concern the resources that amplify and engage with Attitude. This paper will focus mainly on the system of Engagement and to a lesser extent Attitude.

#### 3.1 Attitude

The Appraisal system of Attitude is classified as expressing either positive or negative feelings and then according to three basic types: Affect, Judgement and Appreciation. The three basic options can be summarised as follows: Affect concerns the semantic resources used to construe emotions; Judgement concerns resources deployed for construing evaluations of behaviour; and Appreciation construes the ‘aesthetic’ quality of things, for example:

**Extract 1:** (Run-D.M.C. 1984: clause #26)

now all the time you’re **crying** [-Affect] that you’re underpaid

**Extract 2:** (LL Cool J 1985: 21 & 29)

i’m a **hip-hop gangster** [+Judgement]

i’m the **leader** [+Judgement] of the show

**Extract 3:** (Public Enemy 1990a: 23 & 26)

it all adds up to a **funky** [-Appreciation] situation  
nine one one is a **joke** [-Appreciation] in yo' town

Attitude is also simultaneously classified as either inscribed or invoked. Under the inscribed category, a single lexical item contains the positive or negative value and can be further classified according to the three main Attitude types, for example:

**Extract 4:** (Public Enemy 1990b: 49-50)  
'cause i'm **black** [+Judgement]  
and i'm **proud** [+Affect]

In contrast, invoked Attitude is realised by 'tokens' of neutral ideational meanings that invoke a positive or negative evaluation. In extract 5, ideational 'tokens' such as the process 'stride' and the rapper's possession of 'gold chains' invokes a positive self-evaluation:

**Extract 5:** (Ice T 1991: 78)  
as i stride my gold chains glide back and forth [+Attitude]

In extract 5, the combination of inscribed Attitude 'jungle' and the tokens 'going under' invoke a negative evaluation of the rap artist's circumstances. These clauses also seem to invoke an expression of negative affect as a mood state ('in' the rapper) such as dissatisfaction or unhappiness.

**Extract 6:** (Grandmaster Flash 1982: 45-46)  
it's like a **jungle** [-Appreciation] sometimes  
it makes me wonder how i keep from going under [-Attitude]

Analysing for Attitude, especially invoked Attitude, can be a problematic task (Martin 2003: 172-173). Given that Attitude is not the primary concern of this paper, the method of analysis of Attitude is basic. Inscribed Attitude is coded as Affect, Judgement or Appreciation and will not include the more specific classifications prescribed by Martin and White (2005: 50-57). In order to avoid any multiple coding, this paper will only code invoked Attitude according to positive and negative polarity and not specify the three major types of Attitude.

### 3.2 *Engagement*

Engagement resources work alongside Attitude. However, Engagement does more than reflect individual, inner mental states of certainty or commitment to Attitude. The Engagement system developed by White (e.g. White 2000, White 2003, Martin and White 2005) follows Bakhtin's dialogic perspective of language. According to White, Engagement resources are used by speakers to negotiate a space for particular attitudes and points of view within the diversity of value positions operative in any speech community' (White 2000: 71). And similarly:

Our approach locates us in a tradition in which all utterances are seen as in some way stanced or attitudinal... our approach is informed by Bakhtin's/Voloshinov's now widely influential notions of dialogism and heteroglossia under which all verbal communication, whether written or spoken, is 'dialogic' in that to speak or write is always to reveal the influence of, refer to, or to take up in some way, what has been

said/written before, and simultaneously to anticipate the responses of actual, potential or imagined readers/listeners (Martin and White 2005: 92)

The system of Engagement distinguishes between utterances which do engage with alternate ‘voices’ or speakers’ points of view: heterogloss, and those which do not: monogloss, for example:

**Extract 7:** (Beastie Boys 1992: 19 & 10)

**i’ve got** [Monogloss] depth of perception in my text y’all...

**maybe** [Heterogloss: Entertain] i’m missing the reason that you’re smiling

In extract 7 above, the first proposition of positive Attitude ‘I’ve got depth of perception’ is declared absolutely; there is no dialogic ‘space’ for negotiation of this Attitude. It does not engage with any alternate Attitude. In the following clause of extract 7 however, the rapper leaves ‘open’ the possibility that he is, or is not ‘missing’ ‘the reason that you’re smiling’. In this way, the rapper does engage with alternate points of view.

Heterogloss is further classified into two broad and opposed categories: dialogic contraction and dialogic expansion. Dialogic contraction acts to directly reject or challenge alternate points of view and is categorised as Disclaim and Proclaim which are further classified as Disclaim: Deny, Disclaim: Counter, Proclaim: Concur, Proclaim: Pronounce and Proclaim: Endorse (see Martin and White 2005: 134 for a detailed overview of the Engagement system). The propositions expressed in extract 8 are contracted in that there is little or no dialogic ‘space’ for contrary Attitude. Or in another way, any challenge to the propositions would put a lot at stake interpersonally given the extent to which the rapper has endorsed their point of view by negating or contracting the dialogic ‘space’ for any alternative:

**Extract 8:** (NWA 1988: 77-79)

fuck wit’ me

**i’ll** [Proclaim: Pronounce] put my foot in your arse

**see** [Proclaim: Concur] **i don’t** [Disclaim: Deny] give a fuck

In contrast, dialogic expansion is ‘open’ to alternate points of view and is categorised as either Entertain or Attribute (although the latter is not a feature of the rap music genre). Extracts 9 and 10 below are considered dialogic expansion because they present their proposition as only one of a number of possibilities. This time, from an intersubjective perspective, an interlocutor is able to challenge the rappers’ points of view without the same level of interpersonal threat. In fact, in a slightly different way, it could be said that the speakers are inviting alternate points of view and Attitude, for example:

**Extract 9:** (Arrested Development 1991: 6)

**maybe** [Entertain] she was demonstrating

**Extract 10:** (Ice Cube 1991: 33)

and i **might** [Entertain] start slingin’ bean pies

## 4 Findings

The findings begin with a detailed quantitative summary of the Engagement analysis. The most frequent types of Engagement are exemplified with examples from the data set. The paper will not include a detailed statistical Attitude analysis. The Attitude is simply meant to complement and inform the Engagement findings. Accordingly, a brief summary of Attitude values will be outlined for each rap song and then discussed.

### 4.1 Engagement

Table 2 illustrates the total number of clauses in the entire data set. Those clauses are also classified as either Monogloss or Heterogloss.

**Table 2:** Total Number of Clauses: Monogloss and Heterogloss

<b>total number of clauses</b>	2084
<b>Monogloss</b>	1650
<b>Heterogloss</b>	434

Table 2 shows that there was a far higher frequency of Monogloss compared with Heterogloss. In fact, the ratio is almost 4:1 in favour of Monogloss clauses. Extract 11 from the Beastie Boys (1992) is a good illustration of the rap artists' preference for Monogloss:

**Extract 11:** (Run-D.M.C. 1984: 24-30)

bills **rise** [Monogloss] higher every day  
we **receive** [Monogloss] much lower pay...

it's [Monogloss] like that  
and that's [Monogloss] the way it **is** [Monogloss]

The rap artists' clearly demonstrate a preference for Monogloss and there are several linguistic features of the rap music genre that may contribute to this choice. First, many of the songs, particularly the hip-hop style, involved a high frequency of 'call-and-response'. A call-and-response is when the rap artist interacts with the crowd through various verbal commands. These commands typically involve the rapper instructing the audience to perform certain dance moves or verbal responses, for example:

**Extract 12:** (Kurtis Blow 1980: 23-28)

well these **are** [Monogloss] the breaks  
**break** it up [Monogloss]  
**break** it up [Monogloss]  
**break** it up [Monogloss]  
**throw** [Monogloss] your hands up in the sky  
and **wave** [Monogloss] 'em 'round from side to side

While the function of these commands is probably better analysed via the Speech Function network (e.g. Eggins and Slade 1997), they are also legitimate Monogloss expressions. The command directed at the audience is a non-negotiable, 'bare assertion' that does not engage with any contrary commands.

Similarly, the extremely high frequency of Monogloss may also be attributed to the generic structure of rap songs and popular songs more generally. Rap songs typically comprise a periodicity that includes a chorus section which is subject to

iteration. Moreover, the clauses within those choruses are subject to iteration. Most of the choruses analysed in these rap songs involved Monogloss which were iterated from clause to clause as well as chorus to chorus. In the political rap song *Everyday People* (1991), the chorus is simply the reiteration of the same Monogloss proposition, comprising 12 clauses out of a total of 55 clauses, for example:

**Extract 13:** (Arrested Development 1991: 50-52)

i **am** [Monogloss] everyday people  
 i **am** [Monogloss] everyday people  
 i **am** [Monogloss] everyday people...

Of the 434 examples of Heterogloss Engagement, most were dialogically contracted. Table 3 compares the total frequency of Heterogloss contractions with Heterogloss expansion and includes frequencies from the relevant sub-systems.

**Table 3:** Heteroglossic Propositions

<b>Contract</b>	323	<b>Expand</b>	111
<b>Disclaim</b>	235	<b>Entertain</b>	111
<b>Deny</b>	158	<b>Attribute</b>	0
<b>Counter</b>	77		
<b>Proclaim</b>	88		
<b>Concur</b>	34		
<b>Pronounce</b>	54		
<b>Endorse</b>	0		

Table 3 reveals that when rappers did engage with dialogic alternatives, they most frequently disclaimed or ‘closed down’ those alternate points of view or Attitudes. The following chorus sampled by Jay-Z in *Hard Knock Life* (1998) not only reinforces the rappers’ preference for Monogloss, but also shows that when they did engage with alternate points of view, they mostly contracted the ‘space’ for negotiation:

**Extract 14:** (Jay-Z 1998: 1-7)

it’s [Monogloss] the hard-knock life for us  
 it’s [Monogloss] the hard-knock life for us  
**instead**a [Disclaim: Counter] treated  
 we **get tricked** [Monogloss]  
**instead**a [Disclaim: Counter] kisses  
 we **get kicked** [Monogloss]  
 it’s [Monogloss] the hard-knock life

And similarly, on the few occasions when the rappers did actually engage with alternate points of view and expand or ‘leave open’ the dialogic ‘space’ for negotiation, they would often immediately counter those expressions with contracted Heterogloss or Monogloss propositions, for example:

**Extract 15:** (NWA 1988: 120-124)

ice cube’**ll go stupid** [Proclaim: Pronounce]  
 when i’**m** [Monogloss] full of eight ball  
 i **might** [Entertain] stumble  
**but** [Disclaim: Counter] still won’**t lose** [Disclaim: Deny]

Of the Heterogloss, the majority were Disclaim: Deny. In extract 16, Grandmaster Flash (1982) uses Denial in a variety of ways to negate or ‘close down’ any positive evaluations of his circumstances:

**Extract 16:** (Grandmaster Flash 1982: 5-11)

broken glass everywhere  
 people **piissin’** [Monogloss] on the stairs  
**you know** [Proclaim: Concur] they just **don’t** [Disclaim: Deny] care  
 i **can’t take** [Disclaim: Deny] the smell  
**can’t take** [Disclaim: Deny] the noise  
**got no** [Disclaim: Deny] money **to move out** [Monogloss]  
 i **guess** [Entertain] i **got no** [Disclaim: Deny] choice

To a lesser extent, some Heterogloss was from the system of Proclaim. In this case, the rappers’ propositions are strongly endorsed to the extent that it would be very difficult to negotiate and refute the propositions expressed. In extract 17 for example, LL Cool J’s (1985) positive evaluation of his song, as well as claims of authenticity, are examples of Proclaim:

**Extract 17:** (LL Cool J 1985: 72-76)

i’m [Monogloss] the royal chief rocker ll cool j  
**let** [Monogloss] your big butt bounce from right to left  
 ‘cos it’s a **actual fact** that this jam **is** [Proclaim: Pronounce] def  
**most definitely created** [Proclaim: Pronounce] by me  
**goin’ down** [Monogloss] in radio history

#### 4.2 Attitude

Table 4 illustrates a basic Attitude summary for the data set. Each rap song is summarised according to positive and negative Attitude, the most frequent target of Attitude and most frequent type of Attitude. A second or third target of Attitude is included if its frequency is similar to the most frequent target. Table 4 does not distinguish between the gangsta, hip-hop and political styles.

**Table 4:** Summary of Attitude

Artist	Attitude Summary
Arrested Development	+self-Judgements -Judgements of ‘dominant forces’
Beastie Boys	+self-Judgements -Judgements of ‘you’
The Disposable Heroes...	-Judgements of ‘dominant forces’
Grandmaster Flash...	-Appreciation of own circumstances
Ice Cube	+self-Judgements
Ice T	+self-Judgements -Judgements of ‘you’
Jay-Z	-Appreciation of own circumstances -Judgements of ‘dominant forces’ +self-Judgements
Kurtis Blow	-Appreciation of own circumstances
LL Cool J	+self-Judgements

The Notorious B.I.G.	+self-Judgements
NWA	+self-Judgements -Judgements of 'dominant forces'
Public Enemy a	-Judgement of 'dominant forces'
Public Enemy b	-Appreciation of own circumstances -Judgements of 'dominant forces' +self-Judgements
Run-D.M.C.	-Appreciation of own circumstances +self-Judgements
Snoop Dogg	+self-Judgements

The Attitude summary illustrated in Table 4 can be further generalised according to three main types of Attitude that were most frequently realised in these rap songs:

1. positive self-Judgements
2. negative Appreciations of own circumstances
3. negative Judgements of 'dominant forces' (e.g. the police, the government, gangs, 'white' people...)

Many rap songs from artists such as Ice Cube (1991), LL Cool J (1985) and Snoop Dogg (1992) frequently realised positive invoked self-Judgements, for example:

**Extract 18:** (Snoop Dogg 1993: 46-49)

everything is **fine** [+Appreciation]  
when you listenin' to the d o g [+Attitude]  
i got the **cultivating** [+Appreciation] music [+Attitude]  
that be **captivating** [+Appreciation] [+Attitude]

Other rap artists such as Grandmaster Flash (1982), Kurtis Blow (1980) and Public Enemy (1990a) mainly realised negative evaluations of their own circumstances, either through negative invoked Appreciation or negative Judgements of 'others' who adversely impact on their circumstances. In extract 19 for example, Public Enemy (1990a) are highly critical of the police and the 911 emergency service:

**Extract 19:** (Public Enemy 1990a: 3-5)

now i dialled nine one one a long time ago  
don't you see how **late** [-Appreciation] they're reactin' [-Attitude]  
they only come and they come when they wanna [+Affect] [-Attitude]

Many rap artists combined these two 'Attitudes' within the one song. Jay-Z (1999), NWA (1988) and Public Enemy (1990b) all realised positive invoked self-Judgements as well as negative Appreciations and Judgements to do with their circumstances, for example:

**Extract 20:** (Jay-Z 1999: 18-21 & 25-26)

it's the **hard-knock** [-Appreciation] life  
from standin' on the corners boppin' [+Attitude]  
to drivin' some of the **hottest** [+Appreciation] cars [+Attitude]...

from nightmares of a **lonely** [-Appreciation] cell my only **hell** [-Appreciation]  
but since when y'all niggas know me to fail [+Attitude]

## 5 Discussion: Alignment and the putative consumer

First, we are concerned with the role they play in meaning making processes by which the speaker/writer negotiates relationships of alignment/disalignment vis-à-vis the various value positions referenced by the text and hence vis-à-vis the socially-constituted communities of shared attitude and belief associated with those positions... Secondly, we are concerned with this negotiation of alignment/disalignment as it applies to the relationship which the text construes as holding between speaker/writer and the text's putative addressee. (Martin and White 2005: 95)

Following Martin and White (2005), it is imperative to bring together the Engagement and Attitude findings so as to reveal the ways in which the rappers align or disalign with their expressions of Attitude. In terms of the African-American rap songs analysed in this paper, this relationship can be generally summarised as follows:

1. African-American rappers frequently use Monogloss to strongly align with positive self-evaluations, negative evaluations of their own circumstances and negative evaluations of the 'dominant forces'
2. African-American rappers occasionally use contracted Heterogloss to disalign with positive evaluations of their own circumstances and positive evaluations of the 'dominant forces'

By way of brief illustration, the three extracts used to exemplify the Attitude findings have been additionally coded for Monogloss and contracted Heterogloss Engagement (see underline), for example:

**Extract 21:** (Snoop Dogg 1993: 46-48)

everything is fine [+Appreciation]  
when you listenin' to the d o g [+Attitude]  
i got the cultivating [+Appreciation] music [+Attitude]  
that be captivating [+Appreciation] [+Attitude]

**Extract 22:** (Public Enemy 1990a: 3-5)

now i dialled nine one one a long time ago  
don't you see how **late** [-Appreciation] they're reactin' [-Attitude]  
they only come and they come when they wanna [+Affect] [-Attitude]

**Extract 23:** (Jay-Z 1999: 18-21 & 25-26)

it's the **hard-knock** [-Appreciation] life  
from standin' on the corners boppin' [+Attitude]  
to drivin' some of the **hottest** [+Appreciation] cars [+Attitude]...

from nightmares of a **lonely** [-Appreciation] cell my only **hell** [-Appreciation]  
but since when y'all niggas know me to fail [+Attitude]

The Attitude expressed in extracts 21, 22 and 23 aligns almost exclusively with Monogloss Engagement. Moreover, those few examples of Heterogloss are dialogistically contracted in the form of rhetorical questions: 'don't you see' and 'since when y'all niggaz know me to fail', further aligning the rappers with their positive self-evaluations.

What then are the kinds of socially-constituted communities that share these attitudes and beliefs? Or in a more specific way, who is the putative hearer or archetypal ‘consumer’ seeks to align with the general proposition that African-Americans rappers are resilient, ‘cool’ characters in spite of their unfortunate circumstances? It seems that the rhetoric expressed in these African-American rap songs is intended for those who in some way feel marginalised by a dominant power. Additionally, the extremely high frequency of positive self-evaluations suggests that those same consumers share a sense of self-worth that enables or inspires them to overcome their adverse circumstances.

Most research into the consumer base of rap music reveals that white, middle-class, teenage boys are the largest consumer of rap music. As Krims explains:

For one thing, the single largest purchasing group of rap music may well be middle-class, white teenagers; The RIAA announcement that in 1998, for the first time, rap was the best selling musical genre in the United States certainly suggests a broad base of consumption. (Krims 2000: 4-5)

On the surface, it seems rather contrary that white, middle-class teenagers would share these same feelings of marginalisation and empowerment as expressed by the African-American artists. Of course, feelings of marginalisation can be shared by anyone. As Lipsitz suggests, a less ‘community’ oriented society has resulted in an increasing interest in the lives and culture of the ‘marginalised’:

“In a world where more and more people feel dislocated and disenfranchised, the culture of people who have historically lived with the contradictions of being outsiders becomes increasingly relevant to everyone.” (Lipsitz quoted in Walser 1995: 210)

It appears then, that in a very general way, these rap songs are intended for a ‘marginalised’ consumer, of any race, who seeks to align with values of misfortune and oppression. At the same time, this ‘marginalised’ consumer aligns with values of positive self-worth through explicit positive self-affirmations.

The final point of discussion concerns the ways in which the African-American rap artists present their values or Attitudes for the ‘marginalised’ consumer. As Martin and White explain:

...we are [also] interested in whether the value position is presented as one which can be taken for granted for this particular audience, as one which is some way novel, problematic or contentious, or as one which is likely to be questioned, resisted or rejected.(Martin and White 2005: 93)

Drawing on the Engagement findings and the high frequency of Monogloss propositions (and the very few ‘expanded’ Heterogloss), it is clear that the rap artists do *not* present the value positions of resilient, ‘cool’ characters against self-marginalisation as problematic to their putative consumer. The connection between this finding and Potter’s (1995) post-modern cultural analysis will be discussed below.

## **6 Conclusion**

The general thesis of Potter (1995) is that the African-American vernacular, as a major component of the hip-hop culture, is employed by African-Americans as a tool of resistance against the dominant powers. For Potter, a resistance vernacular is when a

language deploys variance in order to deform and reposition the rules of “intelligibility” set up by the dominant language:

The mode of power of the “minor” [resistant] language, on the other hand, is that of variance, deformation, and appropriation; it is not so much that it refuses or opposes the structural constants sought by the major, as it is that it does not acknowledge the “constant” as a unit of value; on the contrary it values the variant. In doing so, by setting words into a kind of play (such as Signifiyin(g)), the “minor” is a kind of anti-structure; its speakers and writers perform an ongoing deconstruction of the major. (Potter 1995: 68)

As a contribution to this kind of work, the aim of this paper was to apply Appraisal to African-American rap music to investigate the extent to which, and the manner in which, African-American rappers engaged with alternate points of view. It was the initial hypothesis of this paper that the rappers would engage with the values of the dominant forces through Heterogloss. Moreover, it was predicted that the African-American rappers would use dialogically ‘contracted’ Engagement resources so as to ‘close down’ the kinds of values associated with the ‘dominant forces’.

It was found however that the African-American rappers mainly employed Monogloss Engagement which they aligned with many positive self-evaluations as well as some negative evaluations of their own circumstances and negative judgements of the ‘dominant forces’. Significantly, the rappers did not introduce and then explicitly challenge the kinds of values associated with the ‘dominant forces’. They were rarely indulged. Values were simply ‘declared absolutely’, with minimal ‘engagement’ with any positive perceptions of the dominant forces. Perhaps the rhetorical trope identified in these rap songs is better defined as ‘ignoring’, rather than ‘challenging’ the dominant forces.

It is precisely this strategy of ‘resistance by ignoring’ (for want of a much better term) that Potter (1995) considers fundamental to the hip-hop vernacular and African-American culture more generally. Potter begins by critiquing the whole notion of ‘challenging’ the dominant forces:

How can speech that founds itself on a relationship to (if not always or only a reaction *against*) a “dominant” or hegemonic dialect effectively *resist* that dialect? (Potter 1995: 75)

And more, from Gibson:

Unless one can supplant the dominant language by, for example, taking over the lexicon, assuming control of linguistic utterance (controlling the press and publication), then one in calling for dominance is likely to be merely rhetorical. (Gibson in Potter 1995: 75)

Potter goes on to cite the work of Fanon who argues that those (i.e. the colonized) who dream of overthrowing ‘the colonizers’ are engaged in a logic of self-defeat:

... this mental scenario of engagement is precisely the one that the colonizing powers seek to instill. In its place, he argues for *guerilla* tactics, for a battle of forays and blinds... There is no way to win with a battalion of tanks when they are matched against a tactically scattered guerilla force... because it does not reproduce the very terms (of *dominant*

and *subordinate-wanting-to-dominate*) in which the system thinks. (Potter 1995: 76)

What I want to suggest is that the high frequency of Monogloss propositions in African-American rap music, coupled with the many positive self-evaluations, also works in this way. By rarely engaging with 'the alternative' dominant forces, the rappers avoid reproducing the dominant-subordinate terms by which the colonising system thinks. While Potter (1995) cites linguistic examples such as language sampling, signifyin(g), general linguistic play and satire, I would also like to add, in a slightly different way, the African-American rappers high frequency of Monogloss. When African-American rappers express their values as 'absolute', non-negotiable, without contradiction, their language is *more* than 'resistant'. It is unique.

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### **Discography**

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### **List of Appraisal Conventions**

[	]	Appraisal
+		positive Attitude
-		negative Attitude
		invoked Attitude