Not long ago, I was having lunch in a KFC in Harlem, sitting near eight African-American boys, aged about 14. Since 1) it was 1:30 on a school day, 2) they were carrying book bags, and 3) they seemed to be in no hurry, I assumed they were skipping school. They were extremely loud and unruly, tossing food at one another and leaving it on the floor.

Black people ran the restaurant and made up the bulk of the customers, but it was hard to see much healthy “black community” here. After repeatedly warning the boys to stop throwing food and keep quiet, the manager finally told them to leave. The kids ignored her. Only after she called a male security guard did they start slowly making their way out, tauntingly circling the restaurant before ambling off. These teens clearly weren’t monsters, but they seemed to consider themselves exempt from public norms of behavior—as if they had begun to check out of mainstream society.

What struck me most, though, was how fully the boys’ music—hard-edged rap, preaching bone-deep dislike of authority—provided them with a continuing soundtrack to their antisocial behavior. So completely was rap ingrained in their consciousness that every so often, one or another of them would break into cocky, expletive-laden rap lyrics, accompanied by the angular, bellicose gestures typical of rap performance. A couple of his buddies would then join him. Rap was a running decoration in their conversation.

Many writers and thinkers see a kind of informed political engagement, even a revolutionary potential, in rap and hip-hop. They couldn’t be more wrong. By reinforcing the stereotypes that long
hindered blacks, and by teaching young blacks that a thuggish adversarial stance is the properly “authentic” response to a presumptively racist society, rap retards black success.

The venom that suffuses rap had little place in black popular culture—indeed, in black attitudes—before the 1960s. The hip-hop ethos can trace its genealogy to the emergence in that decade of a black ideology that equated black strength and authentic black identity with a militantly adversarial stance toward American society. In the angry new mood, captured by Malcolm X’s upraised fist, many blacks (and many more white liberals) began to view black crime and violence as perfectly natural, even appropriate, responses to the supposed dehumanization and poverty inflicted by a racist society. Briefly, this militant spirit, embodied above all in the Black Panthers, infused black popular culture, from the plays of LeRoi Jones to “blaxploitation” movies, like Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, which celebrated the black criminal rebel as a hero.

But blaxploitation and similar genres burned out fast. The memory of whites blatantly stereotyping blacks was too recent for the typecasting in something like *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* not to offend many blacks. Observed black historian Lerone Bennett: “There is a certain grim white humor in the fact that the black marches and demonstrations of the 1960s reached artistic fulfillment” with “provocative and ultimately insidious reincarnations of all the Sapphires and Studds of yesteryear.”

Early rap mostly steered clear of the Sapphires and Studds, beginning not as a growl from below but as happy party music. The first big rap hit, the Sugar Hill Gang’s 1978 “Rapper’s Delight,” featured a catchy bass groove that drove the music forward, as the jolly rapper celebrated himself as a ladies’ man and a great dancer. Soon, kids across America were rapping along with the nonsense chorus:

- I said a hip, hop, the hippie, the hippie,
- to the hip-hop hop, ah you don’t stop
- the rock it to the bang bang boogie, say
- up jump the boogie,
A string of ebullient raps ensued in the months ahead. At the time, I assumed it was a harmless craze, certain to run out of steam soon.

But rap took a dark turn in the early 1980s, as this “bubble gum” music gave way to a “gangsta” style that picked up where blaxploitation left off. Now top rappers began to write edgy lyrics celebrating street warfare or drugs and promiscuity. Grandmaster Flash’s ominous 1982 hit, “The Message,” with its chorus, “It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from going under,” marked the change in sensibility. It depicted ghetto life as profoundly desolate:

- You grow in the ghetto, living second rate
- And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate.
- The places you play and where you stay
- Looks like one great big alley way.
- You’ll admire all the numberbook takers,
- Thugs, pimps and pushers, and the big money makers.

Music critics fell over themselves to praise “The Message,” treating it as the poetry of the streets—as the elite media has characterized hip-hop ever since. The song’s grim fatalism struck a chord; twice, I’ve heard blacks in audiences for talks on race cite the chorus to underscore a point about black victimhood. So did the warning it carried: “Don’t push me, ’cause I’m close to the edge,” menacingly raps Melle Mel. The ultimate message of “The Message”—that ghetto life is so hopeless that an explosion of violence is both justified and imminent—would become a hip-hop mantra in the years ahead.

The angry, oppositional stance that “The Message” reintroduced into black popular culture transformed rap from a fad into a multi-billion-dollar industry that sold more than 80 million records in the U.S. in 2002—nearly 13 percent of all recordings sold. To rap producers like Russell Simmons, earlier black pop was just sissy music. He despised the “soft, unaggressive music (and non-threatening images)” of artists like Michael Jackson or Luther Vandross. “So the first chance I got,” he says, “I did exactly the opposite.”
In the two decades since “The Message,” hip-hop performers have churned out countless rap numbers that celebrate a ghetto life of unending violence and criminality. Schooly D’s “PSK What Does It Mean?” is a case in point:

- Copped my pistols, jumped into the ride.
- Got at the bar, copped some flack,
- Copped some cheeba-cheeba, it wasn’t wack.
- Got to the place, and who did I see?
- A sucka-ass nigga tryin to sound like me.
- Put my pistol up against his head—
- I said, “Sucka-ass nigga, I should shoot you dead.”

The protagonist of a rhyme by KRS-One (a hip-hop star who would later speak out against rap violence) actually pulls the trigger:

- Knew a drug dealer by the name of Peter—
- Had to buck him down with my 9 millimeter.

Police forces became marauding invaders in the gangsta-rap imagination. The late West Coast rapper Tupac Shakur expressed the attitude:

- Ya gotta know how to shake the snakes, nigga,
- ’Cause the police love to break a nigga,
- Send him upstate ’cause they straight up hate the nigga.

Shakur’s anti-police tirade seems tame, however, compared with Ice-T’s infamous “Cop Killer”:

- I got my black shirt on.
- I got my black gloves on.
- I got my ski mask on.
- This shit’s been too long.
- I got my 12-gauge sawed-off.
- I got my headlights turned off.
- I’m ’bout to bust some shots off.
- I’m ’bout to dust some cops off.
- I’m ’bout to kill me somethin’
- A pig stopped me for nuthin’!
- Cop killer, better you than me.
• Cop killer, fuck police brutality! . . .
• Die, die, die pig, die!
• Fuck the police! . . .
• Fuck the police yeah!

Rap also began to offer some of the most icily misogynistic music human history has ever known. Here’s Schooly D again:

• Tell you now, brother, this ain’t no joke,
• She got me to the crib, she laid me on the bed,
• I fucked her from my toes to the top of my head.
• I finally realized the girl was a whore,
• Gave her ten dollars, she asked me for some more.

Jay-Z’s “Is That Yo Bitch?” mines similar themes:

• I don’t love ’em, I fuck ’em.
• I don’t chase ’em, I duck ’em.
• I replace ’em with another one. . . .
• She be all on my dick.

Or, as N.W.A. (an abbreviation of “Niggers with Attitude”) tersely sums up the hip-hop worldview: “Life ain’t nothin’ but bitches and money.”

Rap’s musical accompaniment mirrors the brutality of rap lyrics in its harshness and repetition. Simmons fashions his recordings in contempt for euphony. “What we used for melody was implied melody, and what we used for music was sounds—beats, scratches, stuff played backward, nothing pretty or sweet.” The success of hip-hop has resulted in an ironic reversal. In the seventies, screaming hard rock was in fashion among young whites, while sweet, sinuous funk and soul ruled the black airwaves—a difference I was proud of. But in the eighties, rock quieted down, and black music became the assault on the ears and soul. Anyone who grew up in urban America during the eighties won’t soon forget the young men strolling down streets, blaring this sonic weapon from their boom boxes, with defiant glares daring anyone to ask them to turn it down.

Hip-hop exploded into popular consciousness at the same time as the music video, and rappers were soon all over MTV, reinforcing in
images the ugly world portrayed in rap lyrics. Video after video features rap stars flashing jewelry, driving souped-up cars, sporting weapons, angrily gesticulating at the camera, and cavorting with interchangeable, mindlessly gyrating, scantily clad women.

Of course, not all hip-hop is belligerent or profane—entire CDs of gang-bangin’, police-baiting, woman-bashing invective would get old fast to most listeners. But it’s the nastiest rap that sells best, and the nastiest cuts that make a career. As I write, the top ten best-selling hip-hop recordings are 50 Cent (currently with the second-best-selling record in the nation among all musical genres), Bone Crusher, Lil’ Kim, Fabolous, Lil’ Jon and the East Side Boyz, Cam’ron Presents the Diplomats, Busta Rhymes, Scarface, Mobb Deep, and Eminem. Every one of these groups or performers personifies willful, staged opposition to society—Lil’ Jon and crew even regale us with a song called “Don’t Give a Fuck”—and every one celebrates the ghetto as “where it’s at.” Thus, the occasional dutiful songs in which a rapper urges men to take responsibility for their kids or laments senseless violence are mere garnish. Keeping the thug front and center has become the quickest and most likely way to become a star.

No hip-hop luminary has worked harder than Sean “P. Diddy” Combs, the wildly successful rapper, producer, fashion mogul, and CEO of Bad Boy Records, to cultivate a gangsta image—so much so that he’s blurred the line between playing the bad boy and really being one. Combs may have grown up middle-class in Mount Vernon, New York, and even have attended Howard University for a while, but he’s proven he can gang-bang with the worst. Cops charged Combs with possession of a deadly weapon in 1995. In 1999, he faced charges for assaulting a rival record executive. Most notoriously, police charged him that year with firing a gun at a nightclub in response to an insult, injuring three bystanders, and with fleeing the scene with his entourage (including then-pal Jennifer “J. Lo” Lopez). Combs got off, but his young rapper protégé Jamal “Shyne” Barrow went to prison for firing the gun.
Combs and his crew are far from alone among rappers in keeping up the connection between “rap and rap sheet,” as critic Kelefa Sanneh artfully puts it. Several prominent rappers, including superstar Tupac Shakur, have gone down in hail of bullets—with other rappers often suspected in the killings. Death Row Records producer Marion “Suge” Knight just finished a five-year prison sentence for assault and federal weapons violations. Current rage 50 Cent flaunts his bullet scars in photos; cops recently arrested him for hiding assault weapons in his car. Of the top ten hip-hop sellers mentioned above, five have had scrapes with the law. In 2000, at least five different fights broke out at the Source Hiphop Awards—intended to be the rap industry’s Grammys. The final brawl, involving up to 100 people in the audience and spilling over onto the stage, shut the ceremony down—right after a video tribute to slain rappers. Small wonder a popular rap website goes by the name rapsheet.com.

Many fans, rappers, producers, and intellectuals defend hip-hop’s violence, both real and imagined, and its misogyny as a revolutionary cry of frustration from disempowered youth. For Simmons, gangsta raps “teach listeners something about the lives of the people who create them and remind them that these people exist.” 50 Cent recently told Vibe magazine, “Mainstream America can look at me and say, ‘That’s the mentality of a young man from the ’hood.’ ” University of Pennsylvania black studies professor Michael Eric Dyson has written a book-length paean to Shakur, praising him for “challenging narrow artistic visions of black identity” and for “artistically exploring the attractions and limits of black moral and social subcultures”—just one of countless fawning treatises on rap published in recent years. The National Council of Teachers of English, recommending the use of hip-hop lyrics in urban public school classrooms (as already happens in schools in Oakland, Los Angeles, and other cities), enthuses that “hip-hop can be used as a bridge linking the seemingly vast span between the streets and the world of academics.”

But we’re sorely lacking in imagination if in 2003—long after the civil rights revolution proved a success, at a time of vaulting opportunity for African Americans, when blacks find themselves at the top reaches
of society and politics—we think that it signals progress when black 
kids rattle off violent, sexist, nihilistic, lyrics, like Russians reciting 
Pushkin. Some defended blaxploitation pictures as revolutionary, too, 
but the passage of time has exposed the silliness of such a contention. 
“The message of Sweetback is that if you can get it together and stand 
up to the Man, you can win,” Van Peebles once told an interviewer. 
But win what? All Sweetback did, from what we see in the movie, was 
avoid jail—and it would be nice to have more useful counsel on 
overcoming than “kicking the Man’s ass.” Claims about rap’s political 
potential will look equally gestural in the future. How is it progressive 
to describe life as nothing but “bitches and money”? Or to tell 
impressionable black kids, who’d find every door open to them if they 
just worked hard and learned, that blowing a rival’s head off is “real”? 
How helpful is rap’s sexism in a community plagued by rampant 
illegitimacy and an excruciatingly low marriage rate?

The idea that rap is an authentic cry against oppression is all the sillier 
when you recall that black Americans had lots more to be frustrated 
about in the past but never produced or enjoyed music as nihilistic as 
50 Cent or N.W.A. On the contrary, black popular music was almost 
always affirmative and hopeful. Nor do we discover music of such 
violence in places of great misery like Ethiopia or the Congo—unless 
it’s imported American hip-hop.

Given the hip-hop world’s reflexive alienation, it’s no surprise that its 
explicit political efforts, such as they are, are hardly progressive. 
Simmons has founded the “Hip-Hop Summit Action Network” to 
bring rap stars and fans together in order to forge a “bridge between 
hip-hop and politics.” But HSAN’s policy positions are mostly tired 
bromides. Sticking with the long-discredited idea that urban schools 
fail because of inadequate funding from the stingy, racist white 
Establishment, for example, HSAN joined forces with the teachers’ 
union to protest New York mayor Bloomberg’s proposed education 
budget for its supposed lack of generosity. HSAN has also stuck it to 
President Bush for invading Iraq. And it has vociferously protested the 
affixing of advisory labels on rap CDs that warn parents about the 
obscene language inside. Fighting for rappers’ rights to obscenity: 
that’s some kind of revolution!
Okay, maybe rap isn’t progressive in any meaningful sense, some observers will admit; but isn’t it just a bunch of kids blowing off steam and so nothing to worry about? I think that response is too easy. With music videos, DVD players, Walkmans, the Internet, clothes, and magazines all making hip-hop an accompaniment to a person’s entire existence, we need to take it more seriously. In fact, I would argue that it is seriously harmful to the black community.

The rise of nihilistic rap has mirrored the breakdown of community norms among inner-city youth over the last couple of decades. It was just as gangsta rap hit its stride that neighborhood elders began really to notice that they’d lost control of young black men, who were frequently drifting into lives of gang violence and drug dealing. Well into the seventies, the ghetto was a shabby part of town, where, despite unemployment and rising illegitimacy, a healthy number of people were doing their best to “keep their heads above water,” as the theme song of the old black sitcom Good Times put it.

By the eighties, the ghetto had become a ruleless war zone, where black people were their own worst enemies. It would be silly, of course, to blame hip-hop for this sad downward spiral, but by glamorizing life in the “war zone,” it has made it harder for many of the kids stuck there to extricate themselves. Seeing a privileged star like Sean Combs behave like a street thug tells those kids that there’s nothing more authentic than ghetto pathology, even when you’ve got wealth beyond imagining.

The attitude and style expressed in the hip-hop “identity” keeps blacks down. Almost all hip-hop, gangsta or not, is delivered with a cocky, confrontational cadence that is fast becoming—as attested to by the rowdies at KFC—a common speech style among young black males. Similarly, the arm-slinging, hand-hurling gestures of rap performers have made their way into many young blacks’ casual gesticulations, becoming integral to their self-expression. The problem with such speech and mannerisms is that they make potential employers wary of young black men and can impede a young black’s ability to interact comfortably with co-workers and customers. The black community
has gone through too much to sacrifice upward mobility to the passing kick of an adversarial hip-hop “identity.”

On a deeper level, there is something truly unsettling and tragic about the fact that blacks have become the main agents in disseminating debilitating—dare I say racist—images of themselves. Rap guru Russell Simmons claims that “the coolest stuff about American culture—be it language, dress, or attitude—comes from the underclass. Always has and always will.” Yet back in the bad old days, blacks often complained—with some justification—that the media too often depicted blacks simply as uncivilized. Today, even as television and films depict blacks at all levels of success, hip-hop sends the message that blacks are . . . uncivilized. I find it striking that the cry-racism crowd doesn’t condemn it.

For those who insist that even the invisible structures of society reinforce racism, the burden of proof should rest with them to explain just why hip-hop’s bloody and sexist lyrics and videos and the criminal behavior of many rappers wouldn’t have a powerfully negative effect upon whites’ conception of black people.

Sadly, some black leaders just don’t seem to care what lesson rap conveys. Consider Savannah’s black high schools, which hosted the local rapper Camoflauge as a guest speaker several times before his murder earlier this year. Here’s a representative lyric:

• Gimme tha keys to tha car, I’m ready for war.
• When we ride on these niggas smoke that ass like a ’gar.
• Hit your block with a Glock, clear the set with a Tech . . . .
• You think I’m jokin, see if you laughing when tha pistol be smokin—
• Leave you head split wide open
• And you bones get broken. . . .

More than a few of the Concerned Black People inviting this “artist” to speak to the impressionable youth of Savannah would presumably be the first to cry out about “how whites portray blacks in the media.”
Far from decrying the stereotypes rampant in rap’s present-day blaxploitation, many hip-hop defenders pull the “whitey-does-it-too” trick. They point to the *Godfather* movies or *The Sopranos* as proof that violence and vulgarity are widespread in American popular culture, so that singling out hip-hop for condemnation is simply bigotry. Yet such a defense is pitifully weak. No one really looks for a way of life to emulate or a political project to adopt in *The Sopranos*. But for many of its advocates, hip-hop, with its fantasies of revolution and community and politics, is more than entertainment. It forms a bedrock of young black identity.

Nor will it do to argue that hip-hop isn’t “black” music, since most of its buyers are white, or because the “hip-hop revolution” is nominally open to people of all colors. That whites buy more hip-hop recordings than blacks do is hardly surprising, given that whites vastly outnumber blacks nationwide. More to the point, anyone who claims that rap isn’t black music will need to reconcile that claim with the widespread wariness among blacks of white rappers like Eminem, accused of “stealing our music and giving it back to us.”

At 2 AM on the New York subway not long ago, I saw another scene—more dispiriting than my KFC encounter with the rowdy rapping teens—that captures the essence of rap’s destructiveness. A young black man entered the car and began to rap loudly—profanely, arrogantly—with the usual wild gestures. This went on for five irritating minutes. When no one paid attention, he moved on to another car, all the while spouting his doggerel. This was what this young black man presented as his message to the world—his oratory, if you will.

Anyone who sees such behavior as a path to a better future—anyone, like Professor Dyson, who insists that hip-hop is an urgent “critique of a society that produces the need for the thug persona”—should step back and ask himself just where, exactly, the civil rights–era blacks might have gone wrong in lacking a hip-hop revolution. They created the world of equality, striving, and success I live and thrive in.
Hip-hop creates nothing.