Collectively, black folks in the United States have never wanted to highlight the issue of class and class exploitation, even though there have always been diverse caste and class groups among African-Americans. Racist biases shaped historical scholarship so that the information about African explorers who came to the Americas before Columbus was suppressed along with elementary knowledge of the black folks who came as explorers and immigrants who were never slaves. Indeed, until recently most black people telling the story of our presence here in the so-called New World would begin that narrative with slavery. They would not talk about the Africans who came here bringing gifts of cotton seed, or the small numbers of black immigrants who came seeking the same freedom as their white counterparts.

While a few white Americans are willing to acknowledge that a large majority of the European colonizers who came to these shores were indigents and working-class folks seeking to improve their lot, mostly they tell the story of their arrival on these shores by calling attention to the journeys of the privileged. Like their black counterparts, those whites who could count themselves among the privileged were few. The vast majority of whites who entered states of indentured servitude were working class and poor. Yet the journeys of the privileged have come to constitute the norm “white” colonizer and/or immigrant experience, whereas the norm for black people continues to be slavery.

Annals of history do let us know that there was caste and class division between the small number of free blacks and the majority of the enslaved black population. More often than not racial solidarity forged a bond between black-skinned folks even if they did not share the same caste or class standing. They were bonded by the knowledge that at any moment, whether free or enslaved, they could share the same fate.

This did not mean that free blacks did not at times “lord” it over their enslaved counterparts. Nor did enslavement keep some black folks from emulating white colonizers by embracing a color caste hierarchy wherein fair-skinned individuals had higher rank than their white counterparts. This hierarchy based on color would later be reflected in postslavery class divisions. Since racially mixed slaves often received greater material benefits from their slaveholding white relatives even when those relatives did not publicly acknowledge these blood ties, they often had more resources than their darker counterparts.

Despite segregation and legal racial apartheid, by the onset of the twentieth century distinct class divisions were emerging in segregated black communities. Still, racial solidarity became even more the norm as postslavery white exploitation and oppression intensified. The logic of racial uplift meant that black folks on the bottom of the class hierarchy were encouraged to regard with admiration and respect peers who were gaining class power. In those days, the tiny privileged black middle class
was not seen as the enemy of the working poor and indigent. They were examples that it was possible for everyone to rise. It was this belief that informed W.E.B. DuBois’ vision of a talented tenth that would lead efforts to uplift the race and change the collective lot of African-Americans. In 1903 he emphasized this point, insisting that it was important to develop “the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.” By 1948 he critiqued this earlier supposition stating: “When I came out of college into the world of work, I realized that it was quite possible that my plan of training a talented tenth might put in control and power, a group of selfish, self-indulgent, well-to-do men, whose basic interest in solving the Negro Problem was personal; personal freedom and unhampered enjoyment and use of the world, without any real care, or certainly no arousing care, as to what became of the mass of American Negroes, or of the mass of any people.” Growing up in the fifties, I was acutely aware of the contempt black folks with class privilege directed toward the masses.

In our segregated town, the black folks with relative class power, whom group sociologist E.Franklin Frazier would later identify as the black bourgeoisie, enjoyed their role as mediators between the black masses and the white folks who were really in charge. They openly espoused contempt for less-privileged black folks even as they needed that group to stay on the bottom so they could measure how far up they had gotten by how far down the black masses remained. At the end of the day, no matter our class, all black folks lived together in segregated neighborhoods. The surrounding white supremacist world reminded all of us through exploitation and domination that even the richest black person could be crushed by racism’s heavy weight.

That sense of solidarity was altered by a class-based civil rights struggle whose ultimate goal was to acquire more freedom for those black folks who already had a degree of class privilege however relative. By the late 1960s class-based racial integration disrupted the racial solidarity that often held black folks together despite class difference. Pressured to assimilate into mainstream white culture to increase their class power and status, privileged black individuals began to leave the underprivileged behind, moving into predominately white neighborhoods, taking their money and their industry out of the segregated black world. Historically, white colleges and universities had not yet hired the best and the brightest of black thinkers. Anti-racist sentiment was not the reason for racial integration. Strategically, white politicians recognized the threat that a decolonized militant self-determined black population could pose to the existing status quo.

Desegregation was the way to weaken the collective radicalization of black people that had been generated by militant civil rights and black power movement. It was better to give privileged black people greater access to the existing social structure than to have a radical talented tenth that would lead the black masses to revolt and cultural revolution. Concurrently, a shift in global politics had made it apparent that white people would have to do business with people of color globally to maintain U.S. imperialist economic domination. The old colonialism could not form the basis of contemporary economic exchanges globally. It was vital that new generations of white people learn to relate in new and different ways to people of color globally if the ruling class power of the United States was to remain intact. Given these concerns racial integration was useful. It diffused politics of racial uplift and black radicalization and simultaneously produced a new class of privileged upwardly mobile black folks who would see their interests as more allied with the existing white power structure than with any group of black people. After years of collective struggle, by the end of the sixties liberal individualism had become more the norm for black folks, particularly the black bourgeoisie, more so than the previous politics of communalism, which emphasized racial uplift and sharing resources.
In the community of my growing up it was not difficult to distinguish those black folks with class privilege who were committed to racial uplift, to sharing resources, and those who were eager to exploit the community solely for their own individual gain. The latter were fixated on making money, on flaunting their status and power. They were not respected or revered. That, however, began to change as market values wiped out core beliefs in the integrity of communalism and shared resources, replacing them with the edict that every woman and man “live for yoself, for yoself and nobody else.”

Traditional black communities, like the one I grew up in, which had always included everyone, all classes, were changed by the end of the seventies. Folks with money took their money out of the community. Local black-owned business all but ceased with the exception of the undertakers. Exercising their equal rights as citizens, black folks began to live, and most importantly, to shop, everywhere, seemingly not noticing the changes in predominately black communities. These changes happened all over the United States. By the early nineties, the black poor and underclass were fast becoming isolated segregated communities. Big business, in the form of a booming drug trade, infiltrated these communities and let addiction and the violence it breeds and sustains chip away and ultimately erode the overall well-being of the poor, and working-class black folks left.

Militant black power advocates of the sixties. (many of whom were from privileged class backgrounds) successfully working to end racism, to feed the poor, and raise the consciousness of all would no doubt be shocked to see gates walling off indigent black communities all around this nation. The black middle and upper class in no way protest these modern-day concentration camps. Historical amnesia sets in and they conveniently forget that the fascists who engineered the Nazi holocaust did not begin with gas chambers but rather began their genocidal agenda by hoarding people together and depriving them of the basic necessities of life—adequate food, shelter, health care, etc. Lethal drugs like crack cocaine make gas chambers unnecessary in these modern times. Without outright naming, concentration camp-like conditions now exist in this nation in all major urban communities. Like their uncaring counterparts in other racial groups, most black privileged folks need never enter these communities, need never see the slow genocide that takes place there. They can choose to stand at a distance and blame the victims.

A thriving, corrupt “talented tenth” have not only emerged as the power brokers preaching individual liberalism and black capitalism to everyone (especially the black masses), their biggest commodity is “selling blackness.” They make sure they mask their agenda so black capitalism looks like black self-determination. Whether it is movies made by black filmmakers that glamorize and celebrate black on black predatory violence while placing blame on the victims, or literature produced by black academics and/or writers that does the same, it is evident that the vast majority of privileged class black folks feel they have nothing in common with the black poor. Whenever well-to-do black persons justly complain about the ways racism operates to keep them from reaching the highest pinnacle of career success or the way everyday racism makes it hard for them to get a taxi or does not exempt them from being treated unjustly by the police, if these complaints are not linked to an acknowledgment of how their class power mediates racial injustice in a way that it does not for the poor and underprivileged, they collude in the nation’s refusal to acknowledge the solace and protection class privilege affords them.

Prior to civil rights and militant black power struggle, class privilege did little to help upwardly mobile black folks if white folks wanted to exploit and oppress them with impunity. This is no longer the case. This does not mean that racism does not daily assault black people with class privilege; it does. The pain of the privileged is linked to the pain of the indigent who also daily suffer racial assault, just as anti-racist struggle to end that suffering promises liberation to all classes. However, as
the gap between privileged blacks and the black poor widens, all who are truly committed to justice
and an end to racial domination must break through the denial that allows the haves to disavow the
myriad ways class privilege mediates the pain of racial assault. The black working class, poor, and
underclass cannot use class status and privilege to escape racial assault or to pacify wounds when
they are inflicted.

In large and small ways middle-class, upper-class, and wealthy black people can create lifestyles
that enable them to minimize contact with harsh racism. Numerous privileged black folks hire white
underlings to interface between them and a racist white world. Assimilation is yet another strategy
they deploy to deflect harsh racism away from them and onto “other” blacks. Ellis Closs’s book *The
Rage of the Black Middle Class* reminded everyone that class privilege does not mean that well-off
blacks will not suffer racial assault, and it enrages them. Yet he did not link their rage with a rage
against the conditions imposed upon the black poor and indigent by white supremacist exploitation
and oppression. While all our rage at racism is justifiable, it undermines anti-racist struggle and the
call for social justice when well-off black folks attempt to create a social context where they will be
exempt from racist assault even as the underprivileged remain daily victimized.

Nowadays, practically every public representation of blackness is created by black folks who are
materially privileged. More often than not they speak about the black poor and working class but not
with them, or on their behalf. The presence of a small number of privileged black folks who continue
to work for justice, who work to change this culture so that all black people can live fully and well, is
often obscured by the dominant white culture’s focus on those who are fundamentally opportunistic
and/or corrupt. These conservative black elites, chosen and appointed to positions of authority by the
mainstream, not only take charge of interrupting and shaping public policy that will affect the lives of
underprivileged black folks, they police black folks who do not agree with them or support their
agendas. That policing may take the form of preventing folks from getting jobs, getting heard if they
speak and/or write publicly, or deploying various forms of psychological terrorism.

When possible they use their class power to censor and silence, deploying their greater access to
white mainstream media, and all other avenues of power, in ways that discredit dissenting black
voices. They censor and isolate these voices to diffuse the power of those lone individuals who care
for justice enough to link word and deed, theory and practice. Ideologically, they perpetuate the false
assumption that everyone is really corrupt, that all privileged class blacks by virtue of their
achievements and status betray those without privilege. As this thinking gains widespread acceptance
they need not worry about critique or exposure. They take advantage of the fact that the poor and
underclass masses know nothing about their lives and have no power to expose their contradictions or
their betrayals. They isolate and ignore dissenting voices whether they come from progressive
visionary underprivileged sources or their more radical privileged class counterparts.

More individual black folks than ever before are entering the ranks of the rich and upper class.
Allegiance to their class interests usually supersedes racial solidarity. They are not only leaving the
underprivileged black masses behind, they collude in the systems of domination that ensure the
continued exploitation and oppression of the poor. Unlike many of their middle-class peers who may
be bonded with lower-class and poor people, who are compelled by kinship ties to share resources,
they refuse identification with the black poor, unless it serves their interests to act concerned.
Michael Jordan, one of the richest men in the world, epitomizes this perspective. His commitment to
capitalist profit at any cost has characterized his economic success. For mainstream culture he is the
global example that colonized mind can strengthen one’s class power. There are many wealthy and
upper-class black people who “think like Mike” but they are not in the public eye, or if they are
visible they do not openly reveal their identification with the values of a ruling class elite.

When Harvard academic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., deemed by mainstream white culture to be one of the most powerful black spokespersons in this society, did a program for public television where he candidly challenged the notion that black people across class share common perspectives, he was subject to forms of critique that had not previously characterized black folks’ response to his success. Even so, he and many folks like him live in and conduct business in a world where black people’s response, whether positive or negative, is not perceived as influential or important. Black people do not have the power to invite the black elite to the White House and do not reward them with unprecedented fame, status, and financial remuneration.

The miseducation of all underprivileged black groups strengthens the class power of the nonprogressive black elite. Without anti-racist reparations, a central one being affirmative action programs, which once offered financial aid to the poor and working class, these groups are not allowed entry into the ranks of the talented tenth. Since they are the individuals who are best situated to experientially understand the dynamics of class among black folks, who may retain allegiance to their class of origins and breed dissent in the world of the privileged, denying them access to higher education is a strategic act of repression. Without quality education, which broadens the mind and strengthens one’s capacity to think critically, they are less likely to threaten the status quo. Increasingly, there are few black folks from poor and working-class backgrounds being educated in elite settings. They simply do not have the means. Those select few who receive aid are far more likely to share the conservative perspectives of their well-to-do counterparts.

Unlike my generation (poor and working-class children of the late sixties and seventies), who were able to receive college educations because of financial aid but were not seduced by the fantasy of becoming rich or entering the ranks of the mainstream black elite, as that elite was not yet in place, the underprivileged today are more tempted by the goodies offered by the status quo. Since they have no organized visionary radical movement for social justice to make them more conscious and to sustain them should they rebel, they fear dissent. They are more likely than not to claim that racism has ended or that if it exists it does not affect them. They are more likely to believe that the economic plight of the black masses is caused by a lack of skills, will, and know-how and not by systemic exploitation and oppression. They have learned to think this way from the lessons mainstream culture teaches them about what they must do to succeed. They stand ready to ascend to the heights of class privilege by any means necessary. And now more than ever there is a corrupt talented tenth in place to guide them along the way.

Significantly, even though a growing majority of privileged-class black folks condemn and betray the black poor and underclass, they avoid critique and confrontation themselves by not focusing on their class power. In the nineties they prefer to talk about race and ignore class. All black people know that no matter your class you will suffer wounds inflicted by racism, however relative. Fewer black people know intimately the concrete everyday ways class power and privilege mediate this pain, allowing some black folks to live luxuriously despite racism. Sadly, to escape this pain or to shield themselves from the genocide that is assaulting black masses, they surrender all transformative forms of racial solidarity in anti-racist struggle to protect their class interests. They betray their people even as they maintain their status and public image by pretending that they know best and are best positioned to protect the collective public good of all black people irrespective of class.

The black masses are encouraged by an empowered privileged few to believe that any critique they or anyone makes of the class power of black elites is merely sour grapes. Or they are made to feel they are interfering with racial uplift and racial solidarity if they want to talk about class. They live
the reality of class divisions among black people. Unlike the black elite, they are not ashamed or afraid to talk about class; they simply have little or no public venues in which to air their views. Radical black voices, especially those with some degree of class privilege, must have the courage to talk about class. Racial solidarity in anti-racist struggle can, sometimes does, and must coexist with a recognition of the importance of ending class elitism.

Vigilant critique of the politics of class in diverse black communities is and should be a dynamic dimension of all progressive struggles for black self-determination. Being upwardly mobile need not mean that one betrays the people on the bottom. Yet we need to know more about the concrete ways we can have a degree of class privilege without abandoning allegiance to those who are underprivileged or accountability for their fate. Progressive black folks who have class privilege must intervene when our more conservative and liberal counterparts seek to deny the reality of black on black class cruelty and exploitation.

We must courageously challenge the privileged who aggressively seek to deny the disadvantaged a chance to change their lot. Privileged people are the individuals who create representations of blackness where education is deemed valueless, where violence is glamorous, where the poor are dehumanized. These images are not just produced by white folks. Understanding that many black people seeking success in the existing white supremacist capitalist patriarchy embrace white supremacist thought and action, we need sophisticated strategies to challenge and resist their exploitation and oppression of the masses. Saying that they are not “black” or that they are “Uncle Toms” is a shallow critique that does not address in any meaningful way the reality that any viable anti-racist movement for social justice must have a program aimed at decolonizing and converting those black folks who act in collusion with the status quo. Conversion empowers; judgmental assaults alienate.

Until visionary black thinkers, from all walks of life, can create strategies and lifestyles that embrace the idea of empowerment without domination for all classes, all efforts toward black self-determination will fail. Were the black poor and underclass able to create constructive class solidarity, there would be hope that their needs would be articulated and addressed. Progressive black “elites” must humanely confront and challenge conservative peers. It is our task to forge a vision of solidarity in ending domination, which includes anti-racist struggle that realistically confronts class difference and constructively intervenes on the growing class antagonism between black folks with class privilege and the black masses who are daily being stripped of class power. While we need not return to the notion of leadership by a talented tenth, we do need to draw on the legacy of constant radical commitment to social justice for all, which undergirds the dream of liberatory black self-determination that was at the heart of DuBois’ vision.