

Bringing my Full Self into Organizing

Learning to Slow Down, Love, and Organize



By Cazembe Jackson
Saturday, April 5, 2025

I got involved with organizing in 2012—March 26th, to be exact. I remember the date because it was a month after Trayvon Martin had been murdered by George Zimmerman. I wanted to do something about it, so I went to a rally where I lived in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Tennessee had similar “stand-your-ground” laws as the one in Florida that allowed George Zimmerman to walk free. The rally leader said, “What happened to Trayvon can also happen to somebody that you know—even someone in your family.” Organizers told those who wanted to take action to hang around after the rally, and I stayed.

Actually, prior to the rally I had already been given a role. I was asked to do a media interview because the previous organizer was unavailable. I was trusted right away to fulfill an important task. It’s one of the things that made me stick around after the rally: I felt like I had something to contribute.

Soon enough, I would do more than just join an organization—I would help reactivate one. With some other dear comrades, we restarted **Concerned Citizens for Justice (CCJ)** in Chattanooga, and that launched me onto a journey of organizing that continues today.



Moving and Movements: From Austin to Chattanooga

I came to Chattanooga from Austin, Texas. Being a “stereotypical queer,” I rented a U-Haul and moved to Tennessee for a girlfriend. During this time, I started to become more socially activated and politically conscious, reading Assata Shakur’s autobiography, following Occupy Wall Street, and learning about the state sponsored murder of Troy Davis in Georgia. I was an “armchair activist” during this time, getting people to sign petitions and helping share other people’s messages about rallies and events.

This essay was produced in collaboration with the People’s Think Tank (PTT). Researchers from PTT interviewed organizers (such as the author of this piece) and worked with them to create these essays. We believe that these essays offer important lessons for movement builders seeking to pursue intersectional organizing, connect communities and movements, build solidarity, and achieve education justice. The views expressed in these essays are the author’s and not necessarily those of the People’s Think Tank.

After the rally and starting with CCJ, I got more and more directly involved in justice movements. In 2013, fellow organizers at CCJ connected to the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement recruited me to help elect famed civil rights attorney Baba Chokwe Lumumba as mayor of Jackson, Mississippi. Many movement veterans came to Jackson to support the campaign. These were people I read stories about, elders like Baba Saladin Muhammad and Baba Ajamu Dillahunt. Although there were lots of young people too, sitting at the feet of these elders taught me so much about the science of organizing. We would canvas and phone bank, hold signs on street corners, and host barbecues to get to know the community. I formed close relationships with many of the folks who helped get Baba Chokwe elected; I'm still close to them today.

I later joined [Southerners on New Ground](#) (SONG), a multiracial, queer- and trans-centered organization, as well as Black Lives Matter (BLM). Both spaces were very queer and very trans in a way I hadn't seen before. I learned how to bring my full self into organizing. Before SONG and BLM, I felt like I had to choose between letting either all of my Blackness or all of my queer self show up into the organizing work—never both at the same time. At SONG, for the first time I could say, "I'm Black and I'm queer, and I'm talking to other Black queer folks in the South about building power and learning how to build power."

Over the years, I became involved with other groups and coalitions, such as Freedom Road (now [Liberation Road](#)), [Movement for Black Lives](#), [United for Respect](#), [Rising Majority](#), and [Fight for \\$15](#). I worked on diverse issues such as childcare, fair wages, and police brutality.



After a few years, I landed at [Right to the City](#), an alliance of organizations that do base-building work around housing and climate justice. I'm a national organizer for transformative organizing. Currently, we're helping to build a school for transformative organizing.

Through my work in all of these organizations, I learned the lesson that victories don't just happen. Baba Chokwe's election in Jackson, for example, didn't just come out of thin air. It was part of a plan that was built over time: the Jackson-Kush Plan, which focuses on Black self-determination and economic democracy.

Evolving Cultures of Organizing: From Traditions to TikTok

Through both the Black Radical and Southern Cultural Organizing traditions, I got my feet wet in learning how race was connected to capitalism and how other systems of oppression fold into that. I

learned about how to use culture, specifically Black Southern culture, to build visions and employ tactics to fight those systems of oppression.

By Black Southern Culture I first mean singing—lots of singing. Singing that has messages that uplift and inspire folks to want to fight. In this tradition, we sing a lot of songs, and there's always food at each gathering. We also create songs, poems, and art. Sometimes, we can get caught up in writing ten- to thirty-page documents to move a thing (I'm guilty of this), but we can also use art to achieve the same goal. For example, if there's a rally coming up, and we make a TikTok to promote it, Cultural Organizing gets us to think about how we can make and feature

puppets or drums that can also be used in the rally itself, instead of just acting out something scripted.

I have been fortunate to have a number of mentors on my organizing journey. Some taught me about what it means to fight for socialism and social justice. Late Mayor Baba Chokwe Lumumba was the first Black nationalist that I heard talk about Black self-determination that includes queer people, helping me to see myself in that movement.

Mentorship is a two-way street. While I have been blessed by receiving so much from movement giants, I support a lot of younger people, who affectionately call me Uncle Caz. I'm there for them too.

BOLDly Transforming Ourselves to Transform the Movement

Another group of brilliant mentors comes from my 2016 BOLD cohort. BOLD, or [Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity](#), changed the way I live my life.

I had been trying to figure out how to do this new masculinity thing in a way that wasn't toxic. At our first meeting, I told my cohort that I had been undergoing testosterone therapy for almost a year, warning them, "I don't cry, or really have emotions, so don't feel bad if I don't emote when everybody else does." But in BOLD, I ended up being the first person to cry—the first one who completely opened up.

In BOLD, we focused on creating personal commitments and a plan of action to fulfill them. My commitment was and continues to be: I'm a commitment to loving myself so deeply that others are inspired to love themselves just as deep. To create these commitments, our trainers made us think deeply about questions like, "What's important to you? Why do you do this organizing work?" We studied *Uses of the Erotic* by Audre Lorde and dug deep to identify who inspired us to keep going when it was hard, when we were tired, and when things weren't going the way that we wanted. I

realized that it was Black trans people who inspired me.

Through this process of self-reflection, I realized that I needed an invitation to love myself, and I wanted to invite other Black trans folks to love themselves too. However, I wasn't in love with myself at the time. I knew that at times I embodied this love, and at others I didn't. When this happens now, I re-ground in my practices, reminding myself of the important healing work that I'm doing.

I grew so much during that training, which helped me understand my own self-worth and value. Another question I was encouraged to think deeply about was, "What do you need to do, or let go of, in order to love yourself deeply?" My answer: figuring out if my birth mom actually loved me or not. Since then, I've succeeded in building a functional and healthy relationship with her. I realized that I was loved from birth, which has also helped me love myself more fully.

BOLD not only changed my life; it changed the trajectory of the way I organize, partially because it emphasized political education and study of strategy. BOLD also taught us that, in order to transform society towards our vision for the future, we have to transform ourselves. Like Assata Shakur and other revolutionaries have said, "The revolution begins with you."

BOLD also created something called "Maroon Space." In Maroon Space, you just feel really safe, knowing that everybody else around you is willing to protect you; likewise, you commit to protecting them. We call each other family, and I still have relationships with so many of them. Jonathan "Jomo" Stith, a national organizer with BOLD, is another mentor who helped me learn to engage with masculinity in a non-toxic way. Our relationship is symbiotic because he might say that he's learned from me too.

Finally, I've learned from BOLD that organizing has to be about more than just moving numbers or moving people along a leadership development

track. We have to be talking about what theory we believe in that will help us get to our “next alternative.” I call it socialism, but people can call it whatever they want. Getting there, and changing society as a whole, requires a transformation of our organizations—and a transformation of self.



Intersectionality in Ourselves and Our Organizing

I live at the intersection of a lot of things. I come from a working-class background; I'm Black; I'm Southern; I'm trans and queer. There's a mile-long list of additional identities that I hold which intersect. In organizing spaces, I often look around the room and notice who isn't at the table. Since I bring my whole self into organizing spaces, I'm able to bring a lot of identities that are not usually represented in organizing, particularly trans folks.

I organize around reproductive justice too. Very few men speak up on reproductive justice and about abortion-related issues. I bring all my identities to this work to help shift dominant narratives. People like to call abortion a woman's issue, but men and non-binary folks are also in need of reproductive healthcare.

My various identities also help me “see” other folks. I feel like I can relate to many types of people, which makes it easier to build strong and deep relationships with them. They see some of

themselves in me because I'm bringing all these different identities into the space.

I often conflate the concept of intersectional organizing with transformative organizing. Both approaches understand systems of oppression including capitalism, cis-heteropatriarchy, classism, racism, and climate injustice as interconnected. Seeing them as interconnected means that the strategy and vision that gets built must address all of them. We can't say, “Well, we'll just work on racism today.”

Intersectional organizing means building strategies, visions and tactics that address systems of oppression as being connected, not siloed. At Right to the City, we try to practice that definition of intersectional organizing. When we talk about our organization's “DNA”, our key principles are about justice for all. One of our initiatives is called “Homes for All,” meaning that housing is a human right and that everybody should be able to have a home that they can call theirs.

For that to happen, there must be systemic changes that call into question capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism. We must take a multi-arena approach: we won't defeat fascism by only fighting in the electoral arena, for example.

Intersectional organizing also means having practices of collective care. We do this through organizational policies such as parental leave and other paid time off to promote work-life balance. We care for the individual as well as the larger alliance.

Slowing Down to Enact Solidarity

To me, two or more parties participating together in the work towards a common goal is solidarity. I think charity, the act of giving services to people, is what a lot of nonprofits do. That's not a bad thing. In building solidarity, however, everybody participates. For example, when I came into Concerned Citizens for Justice, I didn't have much political education or organizing experience, but I was given important tasks, like writing agreements

and developing recruitment strategies to build up the organization.

That's how you build solidarity. It involves two things: one, being able to articulate your vision for the future and helping people see their role in that vision; and two, relationship building. Real relationship building means you don't interact with people in an authoritarian and utilitarian manner thinking, "I know what's best for you, so I'm going to call a house meeting and tell you what you need to do." Rather we say, "I see you as a person; I care about you. You're a part of the masses that can make history, so we're going to work together to build towards that vision."

It's important to challenge anti-Black racism, not just because I'm a Black person—although that has a lot to do with it. If our goal is to end racial capitalism, then we must truly understand racism. This includes white supremacy in general, but anti-Black racism specifically, because the way it works is the closer to white you are, whatever the rotating definition of white is, the more privilege you have. Black people are the furthest away from white and end up receiving a type of racism that is specifically based on being Black. This includes erasure or more direct forms of oppression.

It's important to center learning about anti-Black racism so that people understand how racial



This approach comes with challenges, however, especially when you think about multiracial organizing. Not everybody is at the same point in their anti-racism or their class analysis. Building solidarity then, especially in coalitions, involves a lot of education and relationship building. At the same time, we need to slow down, so everybody can move together, which doesn't always happen if you're trying to move fast to achieve a quick victory.

capitalism works. Why do you hear about Black-on-Black crime all the time, but almost never white-on-white crime—even when it happens much more frequently? Or why do we think of Black women when “welfare queens” are mentioned? It's because the campaigns that created those narratives were specifically anti-Black.

It's important to center it in our work too because it helps non-Black folks understand the internalized racism that they need to unpack. Many non-Black folks are actively unpacking their anti-Black racism. These are the people I'm able to be in solidarity-building relationships with because they are doing the work of unpacking.

Slowing down is important here too, because there's some non-Black people who are also poor, trans, or queer. There are also non-Black people who come from countries in the Global South but face many systems of oppression. In solidarity-building, we have to recognize the oppressions that people face and, at the same time, help them understand why anti-Black racism is still a specific thing to center.

What's happening in Palestine right now is a good example of understanding the intersections of oppression. We just learned that one of our coalition members, whose video we had been playing in our new member orientation, is a Zionist. We ended up having a conversation about Israel and Palestine. Many of our members didn't understand the situation in Gaza, so we had a conversation about it. We weren't pressuring anyone to be pro-Palestine or anti-Israel. We wanted to provide information so they could come to their own understanding about whether or not they were on the side of oppressed peoples.

Asking people to name their pronouns at the beginning of meetings is another example of how we understand intersectionality. People are getting used to it in the organizing community.]Outside of organizing, though, it's foreign to many of the new people that we're bringing in. We engage them in a conversation about gender, what pronouns really mean, and why it's important to recognize them. Even when we have ambitious agendas for two-hour meetings, we slow down and talk about naming pronouns, instead of just commanding people to do it.

People often get excited about it. I've been in a room where folks react by saying, "I get to name what my pronouns are? I've never done that before, but this is what my pronouns are." They'll say he, she or create one like "goddess." It's a beautiful thing to watch people come into their own identities because they've been given not only an invitation to do so, but some education around it.

We enact the Saul Alinsky-like idea of meeting people where they are, but we also bring them along. We hold study halls to read and prepare for an upcoming action. We have conversations with people who are new to organizing, but also with people who are experienced organizers, because there is a lack of training in the movement. Many people have been organizing but haven't been trained in the science of organizing or in any ideological tradition. Education is needed to make solidarity happen.

The act of educating is a "both/and" undertaking. BOLD introduced me to Paulo Freire, whose work taught me that before you learn to read the text, you have to learn to read the world. Everybody has knowledge they can contribute. As facilitators, it's not our job to fill our folks up with knowledge, but rather to exchange knowledge with them.

The principles of building solidarity are essential when you're organizing in your local community or even in our own families. My family is the hardest to organize, and we struggle at every gathering. But they move. Organizing with your family or your surrounding community tests your ability to build solidarity. Do you know your neighbors, and do they know you? Have you talked to them? Do you all have any kind of relationship? I do. I know my neighbors, and they know me.

At Right to the City, we engage in what we call translocal organizing, where organizing in one locality is connected to other localities through national action. People might target their own state or local decision makers, but we campaign in a way

that connects all of the targets together, like in our Homes for All initiative.

Loving and Learning: Fighting for a World of Dignity and Respect

Baba Chokwe Lumumba told us that if you don't love people, you'll betray them. I've learned that that is true, especially when you're trying to build solidarity with people. Organizers must love people, talk to them, and build relationships with them. I don't just mean the people in your neighborhood or the ones you're trying to organize. I mean people as in the people—the “masses,” the true makers of history.

It's a journey to be a better and better student of learning. You have to constantly be willing to learn because our material conditions are constantly changing. Different people come in and out of our spaces. Organizing is a journey, and you may never get to a destination where you feel fully healed or organized. The goalpost is constantly moving.

Learn about other people's cultures as you build solidarity. If you have the opportunity and privilege to visit other countries, particularly in the Global South, do it. Read about it if you can't go. Get as much knowledge as you can about what's happening around the world, so you understand the conditions we're fighting against and what's really important to other people.

I'm fighting for a world where everybody is treated with dignity and respect. Marx said that everybody should receive according to their needs. The world that I want to live in is one that cares for people over profit, cares about the climate and the Earth, and doesn't run on extraction but centers a more generative, feminist economy. ❖

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alliance of community-based organizations focused on “growing grassroots power to halt gentrification and displacement, and build democratic, just, and sustainable communities.” Caz identifies as Black, queer, Southern, and trans. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

