“Many call for a revitalized Left to challenge the neoliberal war on the 99%, but few explain what that might look like. Chris Crass not only shows us what an energized radical movement looks like, he demonstrates that it is already here—in anti-racist movements, in women of color feminism, in queer politics, in anti-imperialist and anti-war movements, and in a movement-based anarchism grounded in the struggles of ordinary people to collectively resist oppression and dispossession while building liberatory, democratic communities of resistance. Crass understands all of these movements as a source of strength and solidarity, not diversions from the class struggle. Towards Collective Liberation ought to be essential reading for anyone who believes a different Revolution is possible.”

—ROBIN D.G. KELLEY, author of Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination

Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategy is for activists engaging with dynamic questions of how to create and support effective movements for visionary systemic change. Chris Crass’s collection of essays and interviews presents us with powerful lessons for transformative organizing by offering a firsthand look at the challenges and the opportunities of anti-racist work in white communities, feminist work with men, and bringing women of color feminism into the heart of social movements. Drawing on two decades of personal activist experience and case studies of anti-racist social justice organizations, Crass insightfully explores ways of transforming divisions of race, class, and gender into catalysts for powerful vision, strategy, and praxis. Offering rich examples of successful organizing, and grounded, thoughtful key lessons for movement building, Toward Collective Liberation is a must-read for anyone working for a better world.

“In his writing and organizing, Chris Crass has been at the forefront of building the grassroots, multiracial, feminist movements for justice we need. Towards Collective Liberation takes on questions of leadership, building democratic organizations, and movement strategy, on a very personal level that invites us all to experiment and practice the way we live our values while struggling for systemic change.”

—ELIZABETH ‘BETITA’ MARTINEZ, founder of the Institute for Multiracial Justice and author of De Colores Means All of Us: Latina Views for a Multi-Colored Century

CHRIS CRASS is a longtime organizer, educator, and writer working to build powerful working class–based, feminist, multiracial movements for collective liberation. He has been an organizer with Food Not Bombs, helped launch Catalyst Project, was a co-founder of the Colours of Resistance network and the Heads Up Collective, and was a member of the Against Patriarchy Men’s Group. Originally from California, he currently lives in Knoxville, Tennessee, with his partner and their son.

FOREWORD BY ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ
INTRODUCTION BY CHRIS DIXON

“These are words from the heart, overflowing onto the streets.”

VIJAY PRASHAD
FROM A PLACE OF LOVE
Catalyst Project and the Strategy of Collective Liberation Leadership in White Communities
An Interview with Catalyst Project

For more than a decade Catalyst Project has been devoted to developing anti-racist vision, analysis, strategy, and leadership in white progressive and social justice communities with the goal of building powerful and successful multiracial movements working for systemic change. While working in partnership with organizations in communities of color around the country to help achieve this goal, Catalyst’s efforts in white communities are guided by the question “How do we organize large numbers of white people to work for the liberation of all people that directly challenges the divide-and-rule strategy of white supremacy?” One of the key responses Catalyst has to this question is that we need to develop anti-racist leadership in white communities rooted in collective liberation politics and guided by strategy based in love. What this looks like in practice is the focus of this interview.

I was a founding member of Catalyst and worked with the organization for eleven years. It was my political home and life’s work during those years. The opportunity to do this interview with my comrades, who continue to lead the organization, is a blessing. This interview was conducted in the summer of 2012 with Catalyst collective members Ari Clemenzi, Amie Fishman, Alia Trindle, Becca Tumposky, Clare Bayard, and Molly McClure. Interwoven throughout the interview are different collective members’ reflections and experiences, written in the first person.

What is the purpose and work of Catalyst Project?

Catalyst Project is committed to building powerful global grassroots movements rooted in working-class communities and communities of color. We believe that large, vibrant social movements are required to create the systemic changes for economic, gender, racial, social, and environmental justice we need in society. We also believe that in the United States, social movements for justice have been undermined by systemic racism that shapes not only the economic and political institutions of our society, but also the dominant culture and consciousness of white people.

Catalyst works to answer the challenge from organizers of color who, generation after generation, call on white people who are committed to social justice to work with each
other and within white communities to uproot racism as part of a larger strategy to build powerful movements for broad systemic change. We believe that the only way to move this country towards equity, justice, health, and cooperative systems is for us to dismantle the systems of divide-and-control that keep the 1 percent calling all the shots. Central to this effort is the abolition of white supremacy.

As white people, we’ve internalized a lot of myths. Our common interests actually lie with working-class communities of color, not with the 1 percent who are running this world into the ground. On a very deep level, white people are trained to devalue the lives of people of color. This internalized racial superiority expresses itself within social justice organizing, including among those of us who understand ourselves as anti-racist. We focus on anti-racism because we think it’s a strategic contribution we can make towards organizing white people into multiracial movements for broad social change. Catalyst believes the change that is needed involves challenging patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy along with all other systems of oppression. Therefore, for us, anti-racism necessarily means working against all forms of domination and working towards collective liberation.

Catalyst’s vision and work are based in need and desire. The need is material: racism needs to end for any and all of us to survive. Racism enables economic exploitation that drives down wages and drives up the cost of living, healthcare, education, and the basic needs that more and more people are unable to meet. Racism erodes safety and health for the people of color it targets, and then works on the rest of us. Racism causes environmental crises that impact communities of color first and worst, and are changing life as we know it for all of us.

Our work is also based on the desire for all of us to live into our full humanity. White supremacy locks up, deports, shoots, and impoverishes millions of people of color. We’re losing epic numbers of people and the brilliance, talents, and potential they’re not getting to nourish. Racism deforms the humanity of white people, by enlisting our participation in violence and by distorting our ability to understand ourselves and people of color outside of a lens of superiority and inferiority. We long for a different world, where people of color are not on guard in a daily war against their full participation in society. We ache for a world where we aren’t conscripted into being foot soldiers for the wars of the 1 percent, at home or abroad.

Our work is primarily focused on developing anti-racist consciousness, leadership, organization, vision, strategy, and culture in white communities. We do this to help build a base of white people who are not only committed to working for justice, but who also understand that anti-racist vision and strategy need to be central in all of our social justice work. We do this work in a variety of ways.

Our political education includes trainings with organizations and groups around the country; facilitating community forums and panels of organizers sharing lessons from their work; mentorship between experienced activists and newer activists; and a four-and-a-half-month anti-racist organizer training program. For us, anti-racist political education opens the door to a larger systemic analysis of power and broad visions of liberation, both of which are severely damaged by white supremacist consciousness. Additionally, our
education on anti-racist practice focuses on questions and lessons on movement strategy, multiracial alliance building, organizing methods to build people power, effective leadership, personal and collective accountability, and tools for evaluation. Our goal is not to help raise awareness, although that is important. Our end goal is to help support people to take action to build the movements we need.

Our movement building work includes long-term support for social justice organizations around the country that are integrating anti-racist vision and strategy into their efforts, supporting alliance building between majority-white social justice groups and organizations rooted in communities of color, and direct organizing in struggles we believe have strong potential for radicalizing large numbers of white people and helping further multiracial movements for social change. We believe in a praxis-based approach. Praxis is the process of developing politics through the application of theory to practice, then drawing out lessons from your experience through evaluation and reflection, and then applying those lessons back to both your theory and practice, so that they are continually evolving. Part of our work is to help create space for social justice activists and organizers to draw out lessons from their practice in order to strengthen their anti-racist work. We do this in part through our political education, and we have a strong focus on one-on-one leadership development and mentoring.

We work short and long term with organizations and institutions. Often we start by offering political education to build common frameworks. We learned early on that the best use of trainings for organizations is to support a core of people who are already working to transform their group. Otherwise, there’s a higher risk that one-time trainings will be misused as “Here’s my gold star certifying me as anti-racist” or “Oh, we already did that,” in a way that actually undercuts the importance of ongoing commitment, education, and action.

Catalyst’s political education challenges the idea that racism is a color prejudice to be overcome primarily by controlling individuals’ language. We’ve seen a group’s energy for anti-racist transformation disappear into an internally focused effort to use the “right” words in a way that diverts attention away from the core questions of “how are we contributing effectively to efforts to end racism and work for justice?” This also recentralizes white privilege by making the refinement of white people’s language the top goal. White people are taught to understand racism just as prejudice, and to overlook the institutional power behind it. We work with groups to deepen their analysis of institutional racism, and to locate ourselves both in history and the current realities of racism. We also focus on learning about histories of resistance coming from communities of color, and exploring ways that majority-white groups can work in accountable and effective ways to be useful partners to organizations based in communities of color. Through our work, we’ve seen white and majority-white organizations play much more positive roles in social movements when they integrate anti-racist strategies, approaches, and programs.

For example, we have worked for over a decade with Unitarian Universalist (UU) activists, doing anti-racist training for UU groups, offering mentorship and leadership development for young anti-racist organizers moving anti-racist politics within UU churches, and speaking at national UU gatherings. In the spring and summer of 2010,
there were huge mobilizations in Arizona against the brutal anti-immigrant legislation SB1070. We sent Catalyst organizers to Phoenix, and they were able to use the relationships we had built over time through our political education work with various UU groups to support the majority-white UU congregations to get active for migrant justice in a big way. We also utilized lessons from years of experience working to build up white people's involvement in supporting immigrant leadership in the Bay and nationally, so that we could offer support to emerging white anti-racist leaders who were getting involved for the first time. Having our political education work grounded in organizing and strongly oriented towards taking collective action for racial justice, instead of just using the "correct" anti-racist language, allowed us to effectively support a huge upsurge in the UU's participation in direct actions against SB1070.

Another recent success of our organizational support work is the victory of the Vermont Workers’ Center in resisting racism and maintaining a collective liberation vision in their fight to pass the country’s first universal healthcare law. Catalyst began working with the Vermont Workers Center (VWC) in 2008, leading ten days of anti-racism and organizing trainings across the state and later assisting with strategic planning for their Healthcare is a Human Right campaign. We helped them prepare for ways in which racism would be used to undermine their campaign, and when those strategies were employed, VWC was ready. Just before the bill was to pass, conservative legislators amended it to restrict health care access for undocumented people, a small but significant percentage of Vermont's work force. Progressive legislators said passing it without the restriction was politically impossible. Because of the groundwork we had done together, VWC was quickly able to mobilize their base of mostly white working-class members and supporters along with allies in communities of color to demand health care for all. They put tremendous pressure on the legislature, forcing them to drop the unjust restriction and pass the bill as it was intended.

We also do a lot of emotional support for anti-racist organizers and people in the process of organizational transformation, which we mention because it's often an invisible yet highly important piece of organizing that many people do. Politicized emotional labor, rarely considered “work” at all, can make the difference between someone burning out versus being able to sustain a long, complicated struggle towards change with their vision intact, and is most often done by gender-oppressed people and people of color. Organizing inside communities with high levels of trauma, including post-Katrina New Orleans, and within the military veterans and service members' communities, we've learned deep lessons about the importance of emotional labor in political work.

Catalyst has been deeply influenced by women of color feminism. How has it influenced the way you do anti-racist/collective liberation work in white communities, and the ways you organize to build liberation movement more broadly?

The ideas coming from women of color feminism, including that of Andrea Smith, bell hooks, Cathy Cohen, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Elizabeth Martinez, Ida
B. Wells, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and organizations such as INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, have profoundly shaped Catalyst’s politics, vision, and practice. A major lesson we’ve learned from feminists of color is intersectionality—the idea that all systems of oppression are intertwined and depend on each other, and thus must be addressed in a holistic, interrelated way in theory and practice, in our hearts and in the streets.

For the women of color who first used the term, “intersectionality” meant their refusal to choose between race and gender. For Catalyst, it means addressing our privilege as white people while examining the differences in the way those privileges manifest based on gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, etc. Intersectionality complicates how we understand relationships of power and what’s needed to transform them, and helps us understand that we can’t organize people around one part of themselves and ask them to check the rest of their lives at the door. When we’ve used an intersectional approach to organize white people for social justice, we’ve seen folks access their own motivation and necessity for social change, and seen that translate into long-haul dedication to movement work. We’ve been inspired by the kind of fire-in-the-belly passion that develops as people bring more of themselves to the struggle.

If intersectionality is a framework for recognizing the ways in which oppressions are wrapped up together and structure society, then collective liberation is a corresponding framework for looking at how we organize to transform those relations of power. Collective liberation is an approach to organizing that recognizes that our liberation as white people is wrapped up with and dependent on the liberation of communities of color who are living on the front lines of racial and economic oppression.

Like many white anti-racists, we’ve made mistakes around applying intersectionality to our work; in some cases we organized white people as if they were a homogeneous group, with identical relationships to institutional power and access to resources. We have wanted so urgently for our communities to step up their struggle against racism that at times we’ve alienated people we were working with by flattening out differences that can actually be sources of power and connection for racial justice work. For example, there was a time when the way we talked about white privilege universalized a middle-class white experience. Working-class organizers within Catalyst Project and in our extended community helped us develop a more class-conscious approach. One benefit of more solid class politics is the ability to organize white working-class people around racial justice in a way that connects to their own need for sweeping systemic change, and challenges the divide-and-control tactics of capitalist white supremacy. We can tap into the ways that people within the broad category of “white” experience marginalization, and understand that addressing those experiences of marginalization don’t have to be a distraction from addressing racism and other forms of privilege, but can be a way of identifying and acting from our collective stake in liberation.

In February of 2012, Catalyst sent two organizers to Alabama to work on a campaign to repeal the vicious anti-immigrant law HB256. Collective member Alia Trindle writes:

Using an intersectional approach was crucial to supporting white folks to align and act with racial justice values in Alabama. One day I met with local immigrant leaders
and a white working-class pastor that the leaders were hoping would mobilize his congregation in support of a repeal of HB256. The pastor supported a repeal of the bill, and when I asked him why, he said, “Well, when I was a poor white boy coming up on free lunch, my school cafeteria was divided by how much students paid for their lunch. On one side, there were almost all the white kids and some Black students. On the other side, there was me, a few other white kids, and the rest of the Black students. That wasn’t fair. And this law reminds me of that.” Reflecting on his own experiences of class oppression helped the pastor to connect to the oppression of people of color, and he was able to use that sense of connection to deepen his investment in the struggle for racial justice sweeping the state.

We’ve also learned about the importance of an intersectional approach around gender and sexuality. A huge majority of Catalyst’s constituents are white women and queer and transgender people. In trying to move away from the past mistakes of white feminists who pushed for equal access to the power of white men as opposed to organizing for systemic transformation, many of us younger generation white queers and feminists mistakenly internalized the idea that to be “good anti-racists” we shouldn’t bring up patriarchy or homophobia. Feminists of color teach us that white supremacy depends on heteropatriarchy and class exploitation to work, and they in turn depend on white supremacy to function. So while white feminists need to be doing our work to make sure that the ways we address patriarchy do not universalize or singularly center our own experiences of marginalization, our anti-racist organizing is only as effective as it is intersectional. Thanks to the support and pushing of allies, we are now in a process of learning how we can integrate disability justice as well into our organization’s politics and approach.

Another major lesson we’ve learned from feminists of color is about how centering the margins, where experiences of oppression overlap, can help us learn about and connect to powerful strategies of resistance that actually have the possibility to transform domination and empire at the roots. This is not a narrow vision of identity politics, but an understanding that the fault-lines of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy are a powerful place to organize and vision from, and ripe with potential to blow the whole thing apart.

**Why is organizing from a place of love so important for Catalyst? How did you come to this understanding?**

Traditional models of white anti-racist organizing have a sharp focus on what we are organizing against. Organizing from a place of love means trying to practice and embody what we are organizing towards. Our work is based in a deep love for the liberation of all people, love for the justice movements we are a part of, and love for the legacies of global resistance that inspire our work.

Like many white anti-racist activists in our generation, some Catalyst Project members came into our early anti-racist consciousness and commitment weighed down by a lot of shame and guilt. These feelings made sense in response to the horrifying history and
ongoing violence of white supremacy. Overwhelmed by the fear of making mistakes and perpetuating oppressive dynamics, we found it difficult to believe white people could do anything useful to dismantle white supremacy, let alone be a positive force for justice.

Coming from this background, our organization first approached anti-racist work from a fear-driven and damage-control perspective, in which we tried to control our own and other white people’s individual behavior without actually tackling the systems and institutions that prop up and perpetuate white supremacy. Acknowledging the pain of white supremacy was crucial, but being immobilized and trying to constrict white people’s behavior wasn’t a useful, grounded, or effective way to create change. Soon we began to move from a strictly anti-oppression lens to a collective liberation approach, something we read about in the bell hooks piece “Love as the Practice of Freedom.” This was a big shift in our thinking and practice about why and how we do this work, and what kind of organizing culture we believe will help promote powerful, accountable racial justice contributions from white communities.

The divide-and-control tactics of the 1 percent keep us at odds with each other, split and damage progressive movements for change, and reinforce systems of power and oppression. Collective liberation challenges divide-and-control tactics by emphasizing how our fate is bound up with each other. With collective liberation as our goal, we seek to create a society where everyone has access to human rights, food, dignified work, housing, education, and health care. It means that “no one is free when others are oppressed,” and it means recognizing that oppression strips all of us of our humanity, keeping us disconnected and alienated from each other and the planet. Within a collective liberation vision, white people work to end racism not for or on behalf of the interests of people of color, but because our lives and humanity depend on the eradication of racism as well. We do this work in service of a liberated world where the 99 percent don’t fight each other for crumbs, where people, including white people, no longer ally ourselves with ruling-class elites who don’t have our interests in mind.

Collective liberation is a vision to move towards and a practice to help get us there. Love is crucial to a practice of collective liberation because it involves extending ourselves for someone else’s growth. As opposed to the traditional concept of solidarity, which can involve a rational calculus of interest between groups of people, love allows for an expansive generosity of spirit that opens the space for mutual transformation.

There has been a tendency within white anti-racist culture to distance ourselves from other white people, to want to be seen as the “good” white people. Organizing from a place of love means practicing humility, and leaning towards rather than away from other white people. It means figuring out how to genuinely connect with everyday folks who we need to organize in order to turn the tide towards justice in this country and globally. We also need to be strategic about where and how we can make the most impact. The right wing is using racism to effectively mobilize white people to work against our own long-term material interests (and often short-term interests as well), and if there isn’t a much larger effort to organize white communities for progressive change, the Left will continue to lose ground.

The struggle for racial and economic justice will be a long one, and we believe we need ever-greater numbers of white people to see the necessity and irresistibility of a
transformed world. Organizing from a place of love helps us connect to white people’s values and shared humanity, and helps us involve them in the struggle for justice in meaningful and strategic ways.

**What does organizing from a place of love look like in practice? Can you share examples of how this approach has positively impacted your work?**

Collective member Ari Clemenzi shares lessons about organizing from a place of love while working against the anti-immigrant law HB256:

Catalyst sent two organizers to Alabama in response to a call from immigrant leaders who were seeking support organizing potential white allies in the effort to repeal HB256. Coming from a working-class Boston-area upbringing, there were many cultural barriers to doing anti-racist work in the Deep South, especially on a short-term basis. I didn’t have a regional accent or area code, I looked like a queer from a big city, and in general didn’t quite fit in. This is where coming from a place of love really helped me to build with people across differences. Instead of approaching folks from a place of defensiveness or skepticism, we were open and honest with people, speaking from our hearts, and grounding our interactions in the belief that they were or could become meaningful participants in the movement for racial and economic justice.

When we found people who were open to taking action, we started doing leadership development with them and making organizing asks. For example, we met a member of a white church and ended up spending a lot of time in one-on-one conversations supporting his politics, his excitement to be doing this work, as well as getting to know him and his family. Some of my favorite moments were supporting the people we met to think about strategic ways to plug into anti-racist work and helping them take concrete actions in line with the campaign. We asked people to mobilize their networks, churches, organizations co-workers, and friends to take action against the anti-immigrant law. Some of the people we met did a lot of outreach in their communities, which helped build the campaign and linked us up with other potential allies.

We led education and mobilizing workshops in churches. We intentionally created spaces where no question was considered stupid, where folks could come without already having the “right answers” to the questions around immigration in Alabama, and where people could learn together and share stories about why they were involved in this fight for justice. We addressed internalized white supremacy as it arose, and also used the momentum of participants’ personal stories to encourage people to take action. For example, some people expressed a paternalistic orientation to the project of repealing the anti-immigrant law. We made it clear that there were concrete contributions they could make that were in line with the self-determination of people living under the oppression of HB256. We directly addressed the racism but we also knew that we couldn’t afford to turn people away who could be valuable allies, so we made space for these folks to be slowly transformed through the process of their
actions and involvement in the effort. At the end of the workshop we had each person speak aloud one commitment they were making to stand against this law. Every person in attendance shared that they would participate in the repeal campaign, from putting pressure on their legislators, to writing letters to the editor of their local newspaper in support of racial justice, to organizing a public action.

In practice, organizing from a place of love means working to shift the culture of political spaces to be transformative, where we support each other to grow rather than compete with or tear each other down. We try to promote a culture of respect in our work by proactively orienting towards opportunity, offering constructive critique, and sharing appreciations with the people we struggle alongside. We take a developmental approach to anti-racist organizing, knowing that white people have had different access to opportunities for grappling with the insidious hegemony of racism. We facilitate conversations about the ways that white supremacy culture (of competition, perfectionism, judgment, either/or thinking) manifests in our organizations and work. We acknowledge our bloody history and current reality, our people’s complicity and direct participation in that, while simultaneously holding tight to a conviction that our wholeness and humanity is worth fighting for, and racism must end for any of us to have a chance. This balance is what we’ve found to work best so far in moving people to accountable, effective action for collective liberation.

Organizing from a place of love means knowing where we come from. Part of the process of becoming white for many of our ancestors meant disconnecting from peoples’ histories, cultures, and traditions. We believe that this disconnection is part of what keeps white supremacy in place—many of us don’t know how our ancestors participated in oppression but we also don’t know the resistance stories either. Learning our histories can help anchor us and connect us to our family of origin, and to other white people.

Collective member Amie Fishman writes:

Learning my family history has been a deep part of learning to organize from a place of love and compassion, with a fire for justice. It’s been an important piece of my political development and work. My family’s story is not exceptional—it’s much like the stories of many Eastern European Jewish immigrants whose families sent them to the United States to escape persecution, imprisonment, and death. Learning their stories helped me understand that for them, assimilation into whiteness and the promises that came along with it, was about survival—that becoming white meant becoming American, an identity that signified safety and freedom, even with all the complexity and contradiction that identity brought, as it shaped and morphed with them in it. I began to understand how my grandfather could talk on the one hand about not being allowed to go to medical school because of the quotas placed on Jews, while saying in the same breath that he doesn’t remember experiencing any discrimination as a Jew in the United States. And as Nazi fascism was on the rise, with this repetition of persecution and scapegoating of Jews, I understand how my family could also buy into the idea of a promised land in Israel, where Jews could finally be safe, and left alone. Understanding
my family’s history, where they came from and what they experienced, helped me see their complicity in white supremacy and how they benefited from it. But it also helped me to understand the contradictions and complexity within those roles, and how fragile that identity really was, and in many ways continues to be. It helped me to understand the trauma and the pain, the fear of annihilation that Zionism taps into, which compels Jews to believe the world will never be safe for us.

This understanding helped me to have compassion for my family, for others like them, and to want to fight for a world where no one feels the need to occupy another’s land in order to have the perception of safety from an inevitable betrayal. For me, organizing as an anti-racist and anti-Zionist Jew is about more than opposing the occupation of Palestine. It’s also about transforming what it means to be a Jew, about connecting to that history of persecution and resistance in a way that makes me say that I never want my family or my people, or any people, to be part of that again, neither as oppressed or oppressor. So my political and spiritual work includes working to create a shift in our beliefs and culture. It’s about making obsolete the idea that there is such a shortage of freedom and justice that we must take ours at the expense of someone else’s, and be grateful and relieved when we are not the ones bearing the brunt of oppression in the world. Because we know that is not freedom or justice.

How have Catalyst’s practices developed over time? What are some examples of how you combine political education with organizing?

Over the last twelve years, Catalyst has trained thousands of people and hundreds of organizations—from student activist conferences to faith-based groups to environmentalists. Out of these experiences, we found that longer-term work with organizations and struggles, as well as focusing on key moments of heightened activity, are where we could have a bigger impact. We believe leading from the center rather than critiquing from the sidelines is a critical way that white anti-racists can help make needed change in organizations and institutions, and is a big focus of our leadership development and organizing work. In addition to offering outside support to a core of people doing anti-racist work in an organization, at times Catalyst has either been asked to join an organization, or we have helped create new organizations.

For example, after September 11, Catalyst was supporting a wide range of anti-war efforts, primarily through trainings, as well as helping to organize actions, demonstrations, and conferences. After doing this work for several years, we were asked in 2005 to get involved in the War Resisters League, an organization founded in 1923 to both build a movement against war and to end the root causes of war. WRL was at a ripe moment of wanting to turn anti-racist principles into practice. Resistance in Brooklyn, an anti-imperialist group in New York with members who had worked for years in WRL, made a good case for how Catalyst could make a major contribution. At this time, the anti-war movement was a place where hundreds of thousands of people in the United States were straining to build collective action to challenge racist “wars of choice,” and many people hungered for organizing that went beyond marches. Getting involved with WRL was an
opportunity to work with thousands of white people to contextualize the war in the bigger picture of U.S. militarism and white supremacy, and to build up opportunities for ongoing community-based organizing that really connected struggles against the wars abroad with resistance to the wars at home. We decided to have collective member Clare Bayard, who was leading Catalyst’s efforts in the counter-recruitment movement, run for election to the National Committee (organizing board) of WRL.

Clare writes:

Our work with the War Resisters League (WRL) has been our longest experiment of placing Catalyst staff in an explicit role within an organization going through an internal anti-racist change process. We came in to support longtime members, including those who had recruited us, and newer staff. Within WRL, we formed a multiracial, multigenerational committee to examine the current situation and possibilities, as well as the organization’s history and challenges with collective liberation work. Our committee led a process of changing the structure, program, and orientation of the organization, building off groundwork people had put a lot of labor into over several decades. WRL is approaching its hundred-year anniversary, and has the strengths and weaknesses of an organization with a ton of history.

Partnering with WRL made strategic sense for Catalyst because we were already doing anti-racist organizing within the majority-white anti-war movement, and people within WRL were trying to do that with their base of several thousand people. WRL also has solid, radical politics at its foundation: the organization’s vision is to end the root causes of war, naming capitalism and racism as structures that must be dismantled in order to end wars. The heart of anti-racist transformation for WRL was: “how do we better align with our stated values?”

We knew from Catalyst’s work with other organizations that participating in big internal transitions works best when you are also contributing to the programmatic work. I became involved in program work immediately upon joining. In many ways, the organizational transition was led by shifts in program work. We changed who we were focusing on and resourcing, by building alliances with organizations like the Women of Color Resource Center, Iraq Veterans Against the War, and youth of color–led counter-recruitment projects; we shifted whose voices we lifted up; what projects, actions, and campaigns we prioritized; and how we understood and described the “root causes of war” and the domestic effects of war.

People in WRL were less resistant to the changes than was expected, and so the transition proceeded quickly over three or four years, and then we hit the real challenges. As we made big adjustments in our program, including centering relationship building with communities most impacted by U.S. wars and militarism, we found that in the process of change everyone wanted, new questions arose and the organization was no longer on the same page. People were not in agreement about why and how to focus on supporting and connecting with leadership from communities of color. We encountered challenges familiar to every national grassroots organization,
including how to build a healthier relationship between the national and local levels. Racism, sexism, and other dynamics of oppression and privilege impacted how we tried to address those challenges.

Overall, WRL made significant and positive changes out of this process. Currently, WRL is building with locally based multiracial initiatives, partnering with Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) and South Asia Solidarity Initiative, building with the Iraqi Left, and launching a new demilitarization campaign. Catalyst’s ability to support WRL in grappling with the layers of complications as they made these shifts would have been minimal had we been just outside consultants or trainers. Working side-by-side on program work, and bringing in our own relationships from Catalyst’s work in racial and economic justice organizing, is an entirely different way to bring our strategies and vision into collaborative work. Catalyst has grown a lot from this joint work with WRL.

Another example of Catalyst supporting a core of change makers within an organization is our work with the Anti-Racist Working Group of Common Ground Relief Collective in New Orleans. In this case we worked both as members from within and allies from outside. Collective member Molly McClure writes:

Common Ground was a majority-white volunteer effort co-founded by former Black Panther Malik Rahim that emerged immediately following the aftermath of Katrina. Common Ground attracted several thousand volunteers, predominantly young and white, in the first year of the crisis. Entrenched dynamics of white supremacy took hold quickly, made more intense in the pressure cooker of devastation.

We were asked by allies of color and white anti-racist organizers to come to New Orleans to support Black-led reconstruction organizing, and to work with out of town white volunteers to help their efforts serve rather than undermine the short and long-term needs of New Orleans residents. Additionally, because white supremacy was so obvious in the aftermath of the storm, from the murderously slow and inadequate federal response to the racialized violence of the police, thousands of young people were having powerful political awakenings. Catalyst believed that this was a moment where thousands of white activists could not only make a major contribution to the Black-led reconstruction efforts in New Orleans, but also come away with a lifelong commitment to work for racial justice and collective liberation.

Former Catalyst collective member Ingrid Chapman helped found the Anti-Racist Working Group (ARWG) to bring people together inside Common Ground who shared a commitment to racial justice and wanted to see those politics brought more strongly into the organization. Catalyst organizers joined Common Ground as volunteers and took on program work such as gutting houses, bioremediation, construction, and supporting the daily operation of Common Ground, as a way to build trust, relationships, and to help move anti-racist politics as members of an organization rather than outsiders. We worked to build up the infrastructure, strategy, and leadership of the ARWG in order to make the most anti-racist impact within
Common Ground. Catalyst members also spent half of our time volunteering for the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and other majority-Black organizations. This helped us get feedback around what work the ARWG should prioritize, and have relationships of accountability with local organizers of color.

Some successes from our work as part of the ARWG included: getting anti-racist political education institutionalized into Common Ground’s mandatory new volunteer orientations which reached thousands of people; coordinating a speakers’ series highlighting local organizing efforts led by people of color; facilitating weekly meetings and caucuses for volunteers to talk about how race came up in their work; supporting a higher level of resource sharing with, and respect for, majority–people of color organizations organizing in New Orleans; helping organize for there to be several anti-racist trainings led by the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond; and supporting the leadership development of a core of young anti-racist leaders, both white and of color, many of whom ended up staying in New Orleans for many years doing social justice work.

New Orleans was a turning point for Catalyst in thinking more strategically about how to identify organizing conditions, what resources were needed and what we had to offer, and the opportunities and challenges of a particular moment. That turning point led us to prioritize sending organizers on the ground to work with allies in frontline fights for racial justice, such as in Arizona and Alabama during major immigrant justice mobilizations. We still believe that because racism cuts across every element of our lives, anti-racism is needed everywhere. At the same time, after our work in New Orleans, we began pushing ourselves to be more rigorous in learning how to look for moments with key potential to have a much wider impact than the outcome of the particular battle at hand. We’ve seen that the struggle is the greatest teacher, as they say, and people in motion often have the opportunities to develop politically in more visceral and accelerated ways.

After 2006, we committed on a deeper level to a number of priority work areas: supporting struggles in New Orleans, the South and Southeast; supporting GI resistance organizing within the anti-war movement; and to strengthen our focus on working-class leadership within white anti-racist organizing. We’ve tried to keep the big picture of how racial justice is needed everywhere, and also working on a “fewer branches, deeper roots” kind of model for more impact.

In this time period, we want to replace the dominant liberal white paradigms of “multiculturalism” with collective liberation politics and anti-racist action. We’re working towards broader circles of white people having a power analysis about racism, and seeing compelling opportunities to join up with working-class communities of color to push back on the 1 percent. We want and need these politics to spread like wildfire.

**Why is leadership development so central to your work? What does it mean, what is it trying to accomplish, and what does it look like? How has your practice of leadership development evolved?**
The combination of the words “white people” and “leadership development” often raises suspicion, because we think of the Republican Party or other institutions benefiting the 1 percent, and conclude that white people need less leadership, not more. Yet social movements need leadership to win, leaders who can support more and more people to bring vision, strategy, and organizing skills to our struggles. We believe that people with race, class, or gender privilege can and need to bring conscious leadership to social movements and work in joint struggle with oppressed peoples.

Catalyst’s anti-racist leadership development focuses on supporting white people to increase their participation in racial justice struggles, and cultivating organizers who can move anti-racist politics and practice in various communities, sectors, and movements. Through mentorship and training, we help develop people’s analysis, skills, confidence, flexibility, and experience so they can make stronger contributions to social justice movements. We work to strengthen people’s political clarity, vision, commitment, and resilience practices, so they can stay engaged in anti-racist organizing when the conditions are complex, challenging, and painful.

Many Catalyst members come from activist cultures that are very skeptical of leadership because of the way it can function to suppress democracy and the full participation of people on the margins of a group. But leadership is always present, and when it’s informal, dynamics of entitlement often shape who steps into leadership positions, irrelevant of their experience or suitability for the role. Our intention is to develop accountable and democratic leaders, who in turn help support more people to meaningfully participate in democratic processes and develop leadership skills themselves. In our white supremacist society, it’s crucial that we have more anti-racist leadership from white people who can move white communities. We have way too much leadership from white people working to advance racist agendas. When white people start becoming conscious of our own internalized privilege, there’s a tendency and cultural pressure to step back from any kinds of decision-making, guiding, or visibly central positions. Early in Catalyst’s history we contributed to this perception, related to the damage-control mentality we spoke about earlier in the question about organizing from a place of love.

While we still believe it is vital for white activists to check an urge to be at the center of everything or to think we’re necessary in order for anything to move forward, we have been pushed to move beyond the notion that the answer for white anti-racists is simply to “step back.” Around the time of the Democratic and Republican National Convention protests in 2004, we were challenged by allies of color that the extent to which we and other white anti-racist organizers in our communities were “stepping back” was creating some damaging vacuums of experience, and that our real responsibility was not to hoard and disappear with skills and capacity but to step forward and participate in creating a power-sharing coalition with organizations of color.

For many of us who were politicized in anti-authoritarian political circles, we have been schooled in the idea that “we don’t have leaders” and that we don’t need them. We have been taught to see leadership as inherently hierarchical, and that in order to resist hierarchy, we need to see our groups as flat and equal, with no leaders. There are several
limitations to this culture of “leaderlessness.” First, it makes invisible the leadership that does exist in our organizations, and the differences in political experience that are actually a strength and a resource. Second, when we can’t talk about leadership, there’s less space for us to talk about real power differences in our organizations. For example, in male-dominated groups, we’ve had the experience of men using the pretext of “we are all equal here” to avoid being confronted about sexism. Third, if we aren’t willing to recognize leadership where it exists in positive ways in our organizations and movements, then we are not able to develop a practice of leadership development that supports more people to build their skills and capacity to contribute meaningfully to political struggles.

Catalyst’s commitment to leadership development is connected to our understanding of how social change happens. History teaches us that when frontline communities are in the leadership of social justice struggles, powerful social transformation can happen, because people at the bottom have the knowledge, interest, and power to flip the system, and to lead the transition to another society.

We believe that this process can best be achieved through participatory democratic practices that cultivate political leadership by building grassroots power from below. This principle and practice of participatory democracy as the basis of leadership development emerged through our study of civil rights organizer Ella Baker, who argued that oppressed people are and must become agents of change; that everyday people have the knowledge and lived experience to transform oppressive conditions, and in the process, transform themselves.

We agree with Ella Baker that a key responsibility and quality of leaders is developing more leaders. With this in mind, we created the Anne Braden Anti-Racist Training Program, a four-and-a-half-month leadership development training for white anti-racist activists. The program combines movement history, organizing skills, mentorship, and a volunteer placement in racial justice organizations led by people of color to keep theory and practice firmly linked. The program was named for Anne Braden, a white Southern anti-racist organizer and leader in racial justice movements rooted in communities of color in the South, including the civil rights movement. Braden did similar work to Ella Baker but was focused on white communities and brought a socialist analysis and community-organizing model to the struggle of rooting out racism in the hearts and minds of white people. As of 2011, one hundred people have gone through Catalyst’s Anne Braden Program and are making significant contributions to anti-racist organizing efforts across the United States and in Canada.

When we began the Anne Braden Program, we developed a formal Mentor Circle to pair each of the thirty-five participants with a more experienced white anti-racist organizer. Our intention was to offer another layer of support for the participants’ growth and to create a learning opportunity for the mentors, many of whom had been informally mentoring other activists for years or decades. Yet many of the people we asked to be mentors had a hard time understanding why we asked them to take on this role. Part of our approach to transformative leadership development is working with people at many levels of experience as they push through self-limiting beliefs and blocks to accurately
assess their own and other people’s strengths and areas for growth. We believe mentorship is a two-way street, and good mentors are always learning from the people they’re mentoring, while being clear that they have some specific things to offer to support the growth of their mentee. Expanding a culture of mentorship in our movements, where people are both giving and receiving, is key to transmitting lessons, building multigenerational relationships that cross-fertilize, and developing our capacity to draw out lessons from our own practice. For white anti-racists, where we are trying to not lean on people of color to teach us everything about racism, it is important to support each other in the growth process. Mentorship is one way to do that.

Collective member Becca Tumposky writes:

As a participant in the Braden program, then a member of the Braden Program Leadership Team, and then becoming a collective member, I have been able to experience first-hand the strengths of Catalyst’s approach to leadership development. As a participant in the program, Catalyst resourced my political development though trainings on how white supremacy functions as a divide-and-control tactic to undermine popular movements, and how integrating anti-racist organizing practices can strengthen our efforts and create new historic possibilities. The program also supported my development through one-on-one mentorship, where I was able to explore my political questions and identify places to grow, and resources to help me get there. One of the most important lessons from the program that continues to have a huge impact on my political work was to embrace contradictions as an opportunity for collective growth and development. Instead of expecting people and organizations to be perfect and backing away when they fell short, the program increased my confidence and flexibility to meet people where they are at, to engage and support organizations to move through challenges, and to welcome conflict as part of the work of organizing.

Later, as a member of the Braden Leadership Team, I was able to practice different components of political leadership, including facilitation and training, and also doing one-on-ones with participants myself, supporting them and holding them accountable to their political and organizing goals, as well as to commitments they had made through the program. Through the support of the collective members and leadership team members, I felt prepared to practice doing this, even if it wasn’t perfect. I had opportunities to prepare with collective members beforehand, identifying goals for the conversations, what was needed from my role, and what kinds of challenges to expect. Afterward, we would de-brief these experiences, pulling out lessons of what went well, where I could have done things better, and what questions I had moving forward. Now as a collective member of Catalyst, I am in the position of supporting and preparing leadership team members to understand their roles, carry out the goals of the program, and feel confident in their abilities to step into their leadership in moments that require taking risks or having difficult conversations, as well as continuing to get support for this leadership development work.
Building and developing leaders is at the core of organizing. When white people go beyond critiquing organizations for their racism, to actively supporting anti-racist leadership and identifying and developing people that can move these politics, we are able to contribute something much more powerful and meaningful to social justice struggles. This work is not easy, and our capacity to do it evolves through practice. The most significant political development happens not through workshops and trainings, but in the practice of organizing itself.

We believe that organizations are key building blocks of social movements, and strong organizations are made up of strong leaders who have the skills, analysis, and vision to help advance the work of the organization and the movement forward. As more and more of us take risks, build relationships, and learn to work collaboratively, we begin to create a practice of collective leadership that builds our capacity to someday govern ourselves in the radical democracy that we are working to build.

What are some key lessons from your work to build up vibrant, working class–based, feminist, multiracial movements for collective liberation?

1. Help people locate their stake in the struggle for collective liberation. We need white people to make lifelong commitments to anti-racism, not based on feelings of pity or charity for people of color, within the colonial models we’ve been offered of condescension and “the white man’s burden,” with its toxic and genocidal history. These commitments must be based on a longing in our bones, in the depths of our hearts, for a world that meets all of our needs.

In workshops, we sometimes ask participants to speak at the front of the room, un-rehearsed, about why they are committed to the struggle against white supremacy and for collective liberation. We find the practice of speaking from the heart helps us find our actual stake in the work, becoming more politically grounded in what we lose on a political, economic, social, spiritual, and ecological level by choosing white privilege over collective struggle to end capitalism, and what we want instead. If we want to win over the hearts and minds of masses of white people to this struggle, we need to be able to articulate why, on a historical, political, and humanistic level, they should join us. In our work alongside veterans, for example, we work to increase clarity among everyday folks in this country about how supporting, participating and prolonging racist wars is devastating not only to the people whose home countries we are occupying, but how it’s tearing us apart on every level, physically, economically, and spiritually.

We don’t want to organize people based on guilt and shame. Those feelings can be a sign of coming into consciousness, recognizing the tremendous damage being done by a system we were taught not to see, and understanding our complicity. But guilt and shame are not good drivers on the road to justice. We need to move towards visionary organizing from our deepest desires, towards health and joy and interdependence. One way to move through guilt and shame is to get clear on what we have to lose if white supremacy continues, and what we have to gain by choosing the side of justice and humanity, and locating ourselves alongside the people of the world struggling for liberation.
2. **This work is complex and messy.** Many of us in Catalyst were schooled in a model of anti-racism drawn from the “solidarity” model. Having this framework has been incredibly important for us, in challenging the white chauvinism and insularity that we’d often brought as well-intentioned white people into our activism. While solidarity work has a legacy of complex, graceful, powerful work in movements including Black Power and civil rights, indigenous sovereignty, and Central American anti-intervention work, it is often presented in a dangerously oversimplified form as “white people must follow the leadership of people of color.” The reduction of on-the-ground organizing work into such a binary and depoliticized formula does not carry us very far towards liberation or reflect the intricacies of reality.

People of color do not have a unified set of demands for white people to line up behind. People of color span the political spectrum, and are not all advancing a liberatory agenda. And among people of color who are organizing for collective liberation, there is still no united banner. White activists need to take the best of what solidarity organizing offers, which is its challenge to internalized white superiority and emphasis on seeking and supporting the leadership of organizers of color with whom you have important political alignment. Not that you have to agree on everything—that is where it’s crucial to develop our own political compass in order to be able to navigate complicated realities of work on the ground. That also necessitates building actual working relationships. Through joint struggle, we forge relationships, trust, and dialogue. Sometimes as white people we want to come into an organizing situation and offer our critique and challenge before we’ve gotten our hands dirty doing some actual work. That’s another function of privilege—deciding that our best role is to sit on the sidelines and critique everything that doesn’t meet our standards, rather than getting in there and offering our labor and skills.

For Catalyst, leading from the center rather than critiquing from the sidelines is a crucial part of how we organize, as well as a major thrust of our leadership development work with other white people. White anti-racists need to be doing, not just talking. Picking things apart is a skill white people are often more interested in practicing than the slow and difficult practice of organizing—meeting people where they are at, bringing people together, building organizations and alliances, developing long-term strategies with short-term plans, and implementing organizing efforts that have the possibility to transform people’s daily lives towards our larger visions of liberation. We cannot stay on the sidelines in this struggle. There’s too much at stake. And that is where it gets messy, but it also gets beautiful, brilliant, full of joy, heartache, learning, and possibility. It’s also where we see glimpses of the new world in the shell of the old.

3. **Work with white people while staying grounded in multiracial organizing.** Who is going to work with white people on issues of racism if not other white people? It’s not the responsibility of people of color to continue educating us, often at serious emotional and material expenses. There’s plenty of other work that organizers of color have on their plates when they wind up frequently shouldering the burden of explaining to us how racism is affecting our actions, our working relationships, our communities.
Often white people with a consciousness about racism pull away from the white people, spaces, and institutions in their lives and instead spend all their time in communities of color. Some of this may be about wanting affirmation, and some of it may be the discomfort with hanging out with white people who are not anti-racist. Many times, those of us who aspire to be white anti-racist organizers also have deep desires to be told by people of color that we are “good” white people. For there to be “good white people” there have to be “bad white people.” This encourages discarding and distancing from anyone who messes up, because it might taint us by association. This self-imposed binary doesn’t have room for all of us to be in the long-term complicated process of decolonizing our internalized racism, which means we’ll all make mistakes sometimes, and we all need the support of being held accountable, given feedback, and not cast away. In the early years of Catalyst, we were pushed a lot on the importance of fighting the urge to flee from the communities in which we were raised, or to cut off contact from white people in our lives who need a lot of support in confronting their own racism. We encourage white anti-racists to stay engaged with white people in their lives, and also to be strategic about their time, talents, and energy. Rather than put every thing into arguing with the most racist member of your family, and gauge your success on transforming that one person, think about moving people in your life who are ready, open, or have not really formed strong opinions build momentum rather than solidify stagnation.

That’s on the individual level. On an organizational and movement level, we must be in constant conversation (and collaboration, where appropriate) with multiracial organizations and movements. It’s vital for majority-white activist groups to connect with organizations based in communities of color working on similar issues. Even starting from a lowest common denominator approach of “do no harm,” white activists need to be staying tuned in to the demands, framing, needs and challenges of organizations and communities of color that may be directly affected by the actions we take.

Looking beyond that, building a cohesive multiracial movement takes a lot of coordination and a lot of trust building. Organizing white people to collective action for justice cannot happen in isolation from the guidance and needs of people of color. Real change is going to take multiracial coalitions, and in order for that to happen, we need more white people who are ready to side with justice and see the deep connections they have with communities of color.

4. Anti-racist organizing is transformative organizing. Realigning white people away from the agenda of the 1 percent is a revolutionary project. The system of white supremacy we have in the United States, twinned with capitalism, was developed as a strategy of divide-and-rule. White privilege was created to push non-ruling-class white people to throw in their lot with the white owning class, the planters and merchants and plantation owners, and break from their actual shared interest with enslaved Africans in overcoming shared terrible living conditions of indentured servitude, which got worse with the implementation of chattel slavery and legalized racial oppression of Africans and indigenous nations.

As a result, white people have spent several hundred years being told that we have more in common with the bankers than our co-workers, taught to fear and hate our neighbors,
all while the 1 percent continues to consolidate their wealth and power by robbing everyone. This realignment is a massive project, but we know it’s possible, and have seen glimpses of how powerful it can be, from the white abolitionist children of plantation owners, to the white anti-imperialist dykes who helped break Black liberation leader Assata Shakur out of jail.

Anti-racist organizing is transformative organizing. It calls upon white people to transform ourselves, to make a lifetime commitment to healing from the ways racism takes us out of alignment with humanity. It challenges us to take collective action, to bring more white people into taking active responsibility to end institutional racism. Transformative organizing refers to the dynamic interplay of change on the individual and institutional levels—how as individuals, we are healed and transformed and grow through the process of transforming how we structure society.

Transformative organizing offers a different model than the common “transactional” style of organizing, which suggests that we organize simply as a means towards a very specific short-term end—the idea that a campaign is built solely towards winning a particular concession. Transformative organizing refers to the dynamic interplay of change on the individual and institutional levels—how as individuals we grow, heal, and change through the process of transforming society. It’s transformative to offer our lives and hearts to the work of collective liberation. In the struggle, we come to find community in deep ways, sometimes after we’ve lost some relationships because of our political principles. It is profoundly powerful to know, deep down, what side we are on, to know where and with whom our interests lie, and to build the future together.