



## Graphic Design and Social Justice Activism: The Power of Design on the Road of Racial Equality

*Gordon Fung*

How can young designers relate their creations to social issues, and how can they contribute artistically to social justice? When it comes to activism, graphic designers hold the crucial key to success by creating visually compelling logos, banners, and posters that project a core value with clarity and precision. To exemplify how designers could tackle social and economic justice, Sabiha Basrai and Joy Liu-Trujillo shared their valuable experience and views through the lecture, “Graphic Design and Social Justice Activism,” held on Oct 13, 2020, as part of the Creative Citizens Series.

Basrai presented the history of Design Action Collective—a worker-owned and managed cooperative and a union shop. The Collective commenced in 2002 as a spin-off sector of Inkworks Press, which closed in 2015 in Berkeley. This print union has supported social justice movements and women’s rights since the ‘70s. The collective has created designs for social movements like “Third World Resistance—Reclaiming the legacy of MLK,” “NO BAN NO WALL,” and “Black Lives Matter,” the ongoing resilient fight for racial justice. Following the concise presentation, Basrai and Liu-Trujillo engaged the participants in vivid discussions in several areas, namely “business model,” “design of the BLM logo,” and “responses to a skeptic’s menace.”

As we live under the tyranny of corporations, Steve Jones—an Adjunct Professor at CCA—was curious about the business model of Design Action as a non-profit cooperative. The collective’s cooperative nature allows the designers in the collective to reflect each other’s values. Since the collective functions as a non-hierarchical union, the members can share a spectrum of political thoughts through democratic decision making. The designers also enjoy the freedom and flexibility to choose clients whose beliefs align with their core value of promoting racial and social equality.

Continuing the conversation on entrepreneurship, Cameron Terrones—an audience member—asked for professional advice on being a freelancer in the graphic design

industry. In Liu-Trujillo's view, taking business courses to understand the management of costs, expenses, and budgets is helpful, as is the ability to handle maths and spreadsheets. Basrai encouraged young artists to volunteer their contributions to activist groups. The first point of contact does not need to be related to one's own expertise. Taking up non-paid and unrelated duties might sometimes help one learn about other organizations' practices and establish further connections in the industry.

Black Lives Matter, a nationwide movement that fights against racial injustice, founded in 2013, began with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to respond to the police brutality that caused countless fatalities of innocent African Americans. The acquittal of George Zimmerman, who fatally shot Trayvon Martin, deeply saddened and agitated the Americans who believe in equality and justice. The ongoing BLM movement is a civil uprising, protesting the recent fatal violence Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless other African-American victims have faced at the hands of law enforcement. Thanks in part to the logo's brainy and genuine design and bold typography, the BLM movement's initiation successfully gathered supporters in no time. The high contrast of colors—yellow and black—are also eye-catching enough for the news media and viewers on their cellphones. The color scheme also reminds me of the logo of Amnesty International, an organization that supports human rights, which is fitting.

Skillfully combining the fundamentals of color theory, specifically in contrast and balance, and smart choice of font, the quick-witted prompt by Design Action has devised one of the most influential logos in social activism. As further explained by Liu-Trujillo, the logo allows room for imagination from the participants, which essentially facilitates the easy proliferation of self-made banners based on the BLM logo prototype. To promote the message of social justice, Design Action grants the supporters the right to download and use the logo freely.

While the collective has achieved its goal of supporting social justice when designing for activist groups, it also has received nuisances from anti-activist circles. This adverse reaction from opponents made room for a new campaign that continues to fight against hypocrisy. Scott Underwood—another attendee—asked about the possibility of being a target of harassment and threats as a designer in the collective. In Basrai's opinion, fascist opponents seldom tracked the designers down, but she did receive negative responses from white supremacists while holding activist posters in person. Hackers once targeted the Design Action Collective's website as their work attracts attention from white supremacists who want to undo their activism. Basrai, speaking of an emotional response when encountering hate incidents, humbly acknowledged that frontline activists are people who may identify as, though are not limited to, Land defenders, Water protectors, Equal Rights supporters, grassroots organized (and first-generation) immigrants. Basrai gave credits to these social movement participants, who might face detainment, lose their jobs, get injured or arrested, as they are willing to take up risks that she, as a designer, is entirely free of. For Liu-Trujillo, the threats are not directed to the designer, but the clients' web

sources instead. To cope with such an emotionally charged situation, Liu-Trujillo suggested we share honesty and openness to seek potential solutions as a whole.

Designing is not a client-pleasing duty, but a position that carries social responsibilities to speak for justice through knowledge and expertise. Basrai and Liu-Trujillo's collaborations through the Design Action Collective have successfully demonstrated how design can convey a social movement's power. As Liu-Trujillo recounted, carrying on the responsibility in an activist group creates no burden, but a privilege and real opportunity to continue the legacy that speaks for social justice and equality.

Sabiha Basrai and Joy Liu-Trujillo are the art director and graphic designer of Design Action Collective, respectively. For more of the collective's creative efforts in activism, please check out: <https://designaction.org/portfolio/>

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*Graphic Design and Social Justice Activism* was organized by Professor Steve Jones, with a lecture by Sabiha Basrai and Joy Liu-Trujillo or the Design Action Collective.

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