

# Amplifying *the* Black Voice Through Design

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Minneapolis experienced another devastating occurrence: the murder of an unarmed black man by the police in the midst of the national trial of Derek Chauvin. While the community continued to grieve the injustices against George Floyd, police officer Amy Potter shot and killed Daunte Wright on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021. To inspire unity amongst organizers and protestors, I created typography inspired by the Movement for Black Lives, and messages to unify what we all were, and still are, fighting for. My work is open-source and used on t-shirts, hoodies, posters, and pins, which I organized to be distributed for free within the community. Throughout this visual essay, I will discuss the importance of community protest as a tool for racial justice, and how design can provide an opportunity to support and uplift the voice of Black people.

#### Keywords

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# Amplifying the Black Voice Through Design

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### INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF DESIGN

Each individual has their place in the movement for liberation and justice. Designers, specifically, have the unique opportunity to use their problem-solving skill set and design aesthetics to advocate for the humanity and rights of their fellow community members. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there have been numerous instances that reflect the power of design as a tool for amplifying and supporting the Movement for Black Lives. From the 1936 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) "A Black Man was Lynched Yesterday" flag flown the day after a lynching occurred in the United States to the "I Am A Man" protest posters<sup>1</sup> for the 1968 Poor People's Campaign, to the 2020 community murals created after the murder of George Floyd, art and design have been used as a means to unify messaging to support and further the rights of Black people in the United States. With the work I have created for the racial justice movement as an active community member and community-engaged scholar in Minneapolis, I use some of the same tactics as in the aforementioned designs to support the outcries of the communities I exist within. In this visual essay, I intend to explore the importance of community protests, and how my participation in said protests inspired a typographic response which can be seen throughout activist-led events that call for solidarity, justice, and liberation for the Black communities experiencing the widely known violence by the police state. While the ultimate goal of my work is to perpetuate the idea that abolition is the only means to liberation, I use design as a tool to hold space for the voice of the community, while we work towards a collective future free from violence.

<sup>1</sup> The Poor People's Campaign was created to advocate and demand for the recognition and rights of the working class in the United States (McQuiston, 2019, p. 105).

### About the Author

It is important that in grounding this auto-ethnographic experience I reveal my own positionality to this work. I am a Black queer woman who organizes for abolition and Black liberation in a predominately white region in the Midwest. I often draw upon my own lived experiences and the experiences of my communities to influence the movements and organizing efforts I choose to engage in.

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY PROTEST

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**2** Derek Chauvin was the primary police officer who was charged with the murder of George Floyd. He remains only the third police officer to be charged with killing a civilian in Minnesota (Borzi, 2020).

On April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021, police officer Amy Potter murdered Daunte Wright during a traffic stop which the police admitted was due to air fresheners hanging from his rearview mirror. The Minneapolis community — still mourning the murder of George Floyd and protesting for his justice during the national trial of Derek Chauvin<sup>2</sup> — poured into the streets of Brooklyn Center to protest the murder of Daunte Wright by the Brooklyn Center Police Department. Protestors lined up in front of the city's police station shouting chants, singing songs, and listening to evocative and moving speeches from those leading the charge. With no justice in sight, we proceeded to the streets to further a never-ending movement for our lives — Black humanity. Emotions were high and the community was activated. In *The Art of Protest*, T. V. Reed states that the movement uses “a variety of tactics, including marches, direct action, protest art, and lobbying for specific policy changes at local, state, and federal levels” (2019, p. 82). With the variety of ways to show support for yet another life lost at the hands of police, community members mobilized to protect each other — using their bodies to send a message to the police, the city, the state, and the nation that Black lives matter.

### Whose streets? Our Streets!

Protest is used as a means of institutional disruption supporting social movements. Reed defines movements as “the unauthorized, unofficial, anti-institutional, sustained collective actions of ordinary citizens trying to change their world” (2019, p. xii). And with all eyes still on Minneapolis due to the 2020 uprisings, community members used every opportunity, through action and otherwise, to express their disdain for the institution of police. Along with the community at large, I joined in to stand in front of the police station, uniting in one voice as we shouted the names of the Black victims of the police state. As I looked around, attendees held handmade signs and flags with messages that spoke louder than the words that are constantly visible in the photographs taken by the press.

Protest is a strategic way to gain media attention. This tactic used in conjunction with community protests adds a megaphone to the message. And because the shouts and demands of the community have a national platform, the added pressure on the state sets in place the earnest need for acknowledgment and justice. This was a common practice used by the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which often used the press as an opportunity for theatrical messaging. In her article ‘Visualizing a Black Future: Emory Douglas and the Black Panther Party’, Colette Gaiter describes how the Panthers used this idea of the western avenger and reimagined it with collective Black futures in mind to create a new image of the Black man, one that was “intelligent, handsome, strong, coolly irreverent, well-read and well-dressed *men* with guns” (2018, p. 300). The

Panthers' imagery "visualized a shift from the Civil Rights movement's restraint to the empowerment of threatened armed resistance" (Gaiter, 2018, p. 301). This new idea of the Black man undoubtedly made the 'inherently dangerous and violent' stereotype of the Black man real in order for the Panthers to protect the Black communities. Media attention highlighted these 'theatrics', which heightened the group's notoriety, making them a target of the state.

Nowadays, social media allows for the self-publishing of political messaging and propaganda. #BlackLivesMatter started as a "love letter to Black people" on a Facebook post by co-founder Alicia Garza in 2013. With the control of movement messaging now in the hands of everyday people, media attention does not have to wait for someone with a press pass. Black people now have the opportunity to advocate and publicize the issues of their communities in their own way.

### **The Black Aesthetic**

Protest, specifically for Black liberation, is used as a means of Black expression. The "Black aesthetic" represents the heart of the Black community — often culturally appropriated.<sup>3</sup> It ranges between its representation of the nuances present in the Black community and the expression of the spectrum of emotions — joy and pain. For example, the joy experienced at the conviction of police officers who need to be held accountable for their crimes of violence against the Black community. But also, the pain in the loss of those lives and the fact that the punitive systems of justice do not actually heal our communities.

In the words of Tef Poe, activist and co-founder of Hands Up United: "This ain't yo mama's Civil Rights movement" (McGlone, 2016). This phrase, noted in the same *Washington Post* article, was made popular by activist and organizer Rahiel Tesfamariam when she wore a shirt containing it when she was arrested in August 2016 protesting for the justice of Michael Brown.<sup>4</sup> It is more than just a trendy Black-made saying that makes this an impeccable example of the Black aesthetic. It is a rejection of past tactics of silent sit-ins, turning the other cheek, and honoring the patriarchy when organizing the movement. It is a way forward, for a new generation who boldly speaks their mind and unapologetically shows up in spaces as their true selves — femme, queer, disabled, and the like. The Black aesthetic is a mirror of the culture. And in activism, the Black aesthetic is a mirror of the passion and struggle found in the issues we are fighting for. In this struggle we are brought together, in commune with one another.

Protest is a means of community connection. Much like the Black aesthetic mirroring the Black culture and Black ways of being, so is that of the communal nature of Black communities. This connection is in opposition to that of white supremacy which supports (and boasts) an individualistic and capitalist nature. Relationships are constantly credited as the means to change: our char-

<sup>3</sup> Cultural appropriation is the adoption of the elements of a minority culture by members of the dominant culture without permission, respect, or knowledge about said culture (Moses & Mercer, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Brown, murdered August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014, by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson.

acter, our bias, and our support, unknowingly or not, of the systems of oppression, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness that plague our communities today. This unification of our values does not happen overnight. In fact, it is just as important to intentionally create these connections along with our fight for humanity. In an interview titled “Creating the Future” in *Deem Journal*, activist adrienne maree brown states: “We have to design structures; we have to design relationships; we have to design justice” (2019). It was in this intentional connection with the community that the message of the movement showed up in conversation, community action, chants, and songs.

This community connection ended up being a qualitative and ethnographic research process. This is where the definition of the message began, and where I saw my role in the movement. As a designer and illustrator, I could do my part at the protests, while unifying our message at the same time. I put a megaphone up to the cries of the community to amplify the hard work of Black Minneapolis organizers and activists. I came to the conclusion that the movement needed a uniform, and I wanted to see to it that it was Black as fuck and loud as hell.

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### **DESIGNING THE TYPOGRAPHIC MESSAGING**

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As the owner and creative director of an openly abolitionist design studio, I was already accustomed to using design as propaganda that supports an abolitionist and liberatory collective future. I am well aware that propaganda — the spreading of ideas for the purposes of furthering or promoting a person, cause, or institution — “has a bad reputation” (Bieber et al., 2022, p. 5). There are a variety of examples in which art has been used as propaganda to spread negative, harmful, and violent information to support destructive institutions. In *The Art of Protest: Political Art and Activism*, political artist Tania Bruguera is quoted saying “Art can also be used for political purposes, but that is not political art, that is art propaganda” (Bieber et al., 2022, p. 6). Regardless of whether art propaganda is used for uplifting or oppressing the society that we live in, said propaganda sets movements in motion. Artists and designers alike have a responsibility to use their gifts and skills to frame and tell stories for the good of humanity, regardless of the art’s outright political leaning. A quote that continually inspires the work that I do is from W. E. B. DuBois,

Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used *always [emphasis added]* for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. (DuBois, 1926, par. 29)

This critique of artistic and creative forms is a call to action and critical thought in the outcomes we produce. We have the power to influence the masses not only through the stories we tell but in the way we tell them. “Graphic design has the power to create passionate, action-oriented imagery to engage with communities and to influence, empower, and spark change through visual messaging” (Xia, 2021, p. 212).

As a designer who advocates for the liberation of Black people, I appreciate the ability of my gift to be used for movement work. I am inspired by the quickness, flexibility, and tightly woven strategy of the Movement for Black Lives. The actions I take as a designer are similar to that of the iconic ‘vote’ etched into the foreheads of young Black protestors with zinc oxide — used to protect their skin from the sun — as they fought for voting rights in 1965. I wanted to evoke this same urgency and call back to the feelings of my ancestors as they began and held the line for me and the generations to come. This inspiration birthed a loud, gritty, and high-contrast illustrative type that shouted specific messages that have been expressed over the generations of activists and organizers. This demonstrative typography was an intentional design choice meant to display particular phrases while also leaving room for a full stop when the reader sat with the meaning behind what was being stated. You will see this displayed clearly in the early versions of my typographic development, when I had a bit more time to piece together messaging and imagery (Figures 1-3).



**Figure 1:** Justice Is Overdue. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2019.



**Figure 2:** Justice for All. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2019.

**Figure 3:** Peace and Justice. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2019.

“Unusual, illustrative, or otherwise hard-to-read letters often convey a highly specific visual or intellectual tone and are meant to be looked at rather than through” (Willen & Strals, 2009, p. 1). Combining my love of illustration with typography meant telling a story that was much more than the words themselves. The letterforms, once combined, become containers of expression. “When letters become imagery, they function on two levels: as a container for textual content and as an expression of a visual idea” (Willen & Strals, 2009, p. 87). I was also adamant that the letterforms fit together, much like a puzzle, while keeping the rapid feel. I found this to be similar to the work of organizers and activists in the community.

Many people, many ideas, many actions combine rapidly into an organic puzzle for change. This led me to use the type as a means to communicate quickly as stated by Willen and Strals: “writing emphasizes quick communication and execution above appearance” (2009, p. 27). I wanted to keep the organic style through the use of texture, with an emphasis on speed (although the lettering took much more time to create than what I meant to invoke). This look of casual lettering was “meant to give the *impression* [emphasis added] that the letterforms were rapidly thrown together” (Willen & Strals, 2009, p. 71).

### **Typography as an Emotional Outlet**

Once the letterforms were crafted through sketch and then traced and vectored in Adobe Illustrator, I began to shape messages that expressed my and many of my fellow organizers’ feelings and calls for justice. Even the very act of putting together the typographic puzzle was a means of emotional relief during times when often there are no words. My work not only told a story as a narrative, but a story that evoked passionate emotions. In her *Design Is Storytelling*, Ellen Lupton notes that “a great story does more than representing emotion from a distance. It makes us feel an emotional charge” (2017, p. 56). This sums up what I meant to do: tell the stories of the community to evoke emotional outrage and set the movement in motion.

The slogans and chants of the movement came from the community and are included in my illustrated typographic work. As in the case of Emory Douglas’ (the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party) ‘Newspaper Boy’ (1969), with his illustrative print that boldly displays “All Power to the People,” the source is missing (Durant, 2014, pp. 8–9). This slogan is still used today, often cited by those in the racial justice movement as a claim to our own right to collective power and humanity, which has been stolen by the state. Another phrase that rings out in the fight for the abolition of police is “I Can’t Breathe.” This phrase was placed on the mouths of protestors in commemoration of Eric Garner’s<sup>5</sup> last words (McQuiston, 2019, p. 241). And then again in 2020, during the uprisings

<sup>5</sup> Eric Garner was an unarmed Black man who shouted this phrase eleven times to the police officers who held him down and caused his death in 2014. This phrase was adopted once again in 2020.

after the murder of George Floyd, who shouted the same phrase before his death. These phrases, oftentimes hard to sit with, are meant to remind the community, the nation, and the world of the struggles that Black people face. This discomfort, hopefully, insights change and a new awareness for the movement to inspire action. “Action drives stories, and it also drives the design process. Design makes things happen in the world” (Lupton, 2017, p. 21).

### The Revolution Needs a Uniform

As the word spread about the ways I and my fellow organizers chose to engage in the protests, I was asked by a friend why I decided to use design in this way. I stated that “the movement needs a uniform.” I explained that we cannot be ignored with a united front. If we stood in solidarity looking into the barbed wire fences that surrounded the precinct, our message would not go ignored. Not only would this ‘uniform’ be a message to those in opposition to us, but it would inspire more to join our cause and fight with us, because they know they are a part of something much bigger than them. It required all of us in the fight. Radical Black feminist filmmaker and activist Toni Cade Bambara states: “The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible” (as cited in Tofighian et al., 2022, p. 4). I do not have the luxury of making art for art’s sake. No, my art is propaganda for the side of racial justice and Black liberation.

The phrases I chose to develop are not my own, rather, they are a reflection of the words of activists and organizers that have come before me and that continue fighting today. The phrases that have been designed using my typographic illustrations *so far* include the following (in alphabetic order): *Abolish the Police*, *ACAB*,<sup>6</sup> *All Power to the People*, *Black Lives Matter*, *Defund the Police*, *Fuck 12*,<sup>7</sup> *Justice for Amir Locke*,<sup>8</sup> *Justice for Ma’Khia*,<sup>9</sup> *Justice for Floyd*,<sup>10</sup> *Justice for Wright*,<sup>11</sup> *No Justice No Peace*, *No Justice No Streets*, *People Over Property*, and *Stop Killing Black People* (see Figures 4-17). Leslie Xia states “Activist design is often open source” (2021, p. 212). Each design, as well as the font itself, is open access on my studio’s website.<sup>12</sup> These sayings were (and continue to be) distributed in a similar way by many friends and volunteers on protest gear at demonstrations, rallies, political actions, and marches.

6 This is an acronym meaning “All Cops Are Bastards.”

7 In this phrase, 12 is in reference to the police.

8 Amir Locke, murdered February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022, by Minneapolis police officer Mark Hanneman.

9 Ma’Khia Bryant, murdered April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021, by Columbus police officer Nicholas Reardon.

10 George Floyd, murdered May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

11 Daunte Wright, murdered April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021, by Brooklyn Center police officer Kimberly Potter.

12 [blackbirdrevolt.com/stop-killingblackpeople](http://blackbirdrevolt.com/stop-killingblackpeople)

Figure 4: Abolish the Police.

Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2020.

Figure 5: ACAB. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2021.

Figure 6: All Power to The People. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2021.





**Figure 7:** Black Lives Matter. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2021.



**Figure 8:** Defund the Police. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2020.



**Figure 9:** Fuck 12. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2021.



**Figure 10:** Justice for Amir Locke. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2022.



**Figure 11:** Justice for George Floyd. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2020.



**Figure 12:** Justice for Ma'Khia. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2021.



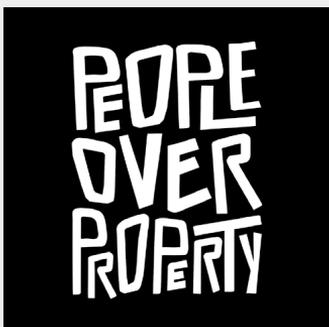
**Figure 13:** Justice for Wright. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2021.



**Figure 14:** No Justice No Peace. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2021.



**Figure 15:** No Justice No Streets. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2022.



**Figure 16:** People Over Property. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2021.



**Figure 17:** Stop Killing Black People. Source: Terresa Moses for Blackbird Revolt, 2020.

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## COMMUNITY DISTRIBUTION

The idea to have free community distributions, which I have since renamed ‘distro’, came about as my close friends and I were organizing protest supplies. Using a digital grassroots approach, we raised funds on our social media platforms for gas masks, umbrellas, hand warmers, gloves, hats, socks, water, snacks, flashlights, anti-bacterial, lotion, etc. We were making constant trips to large suppliers like Menards, filling up multiple carts with provisions for protestors (including ourselves) at Brooklyn Center. After we dropped them off at a safe base for protestors, we geared up and stood on the frontlines with the rest of them. In view were the normal cardboard signs which were being soaked by the rain and snow. There was also a very distinct instruction to wear all black to not stand out in the crowd that was being heavily surveilled by the police. All of these observations sparked the idea in me. I saw that we needed waterproof signs and also, we needed layers to stay warm. With that, I made my first order from a local printer for waterproof signs that included the messaging I had designed. I got them in just a few days and when we did our next drop-off of protest supplies, we were there with signs and buttons to hand out to the protestors in the crowd. Similar to our fundraising efforts, we were now announcing ‘Free Distro’ for the next demonstration. After weeks of protesting, community members were expecting us and arrived in droves to pick up their gear and stand on the frontlines for the justice of Daunte Wright. Other folks from our networks reached out to help volunteer, increasing how much distro we could give out to the protestors.

Throughout the protests and rallies in April and May, we raised over \$27,000 to pay for printed signs, buttons, and apparel. An account of the dates we distributed items and the amount we were able to distribute while engaging with community members considers: On April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021, at the Brooklyn Center Police Station we distributed 300 “Stop Killing Black People” hoodies, 200 buttons of assorted designs, and 100 waterproof signs of assorted designs. On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021, at the Governor’s Residence we passed out 1,000 buttons of assorted designs, 250 waterproof signs of assorted designs, 500 “Black Lives Matter” t-shirts, and 300 “Stop Killing Black People” hoodies. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021, at the Labor Rally, we passed out 500 “Abolish the Police” t-shirts, 250 waterproof signs of assorted designs, and 1,400 buttons of assorted designs. And on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021, at George Floyd Square we handed out 500 “All Power to the People” t-shirts, and 100 waterproof signs of assorted designs.

### Community Appreciation

During the distributions, we experienced togetherness during a time when we were all in shock and enraged at the recent events of yet another murder of an unarmed Black man. We met many people with whom we have since connected and

engaged in more community projects. We had the opportunity to meet Common, the rapper, at George Floyd square, who grabbed one of our “All Power to the People” t-shirts and wore it on stage during his performance at the commemoration event for George Floyd. Other designers also adopted the designs and used them in their particular outlets. Sharp Design Co. took on a few, and hand-painted large banners for protests and to hang outside of other police stations. Another community member used the motifs on her custom jacket design during fashion week. My typographic illustrations have been featured by many photographers, including Mel D. Cole in his recent book *American Protest* (2021, p. 143). The “Black Lives Matter” protest sign photographed by Uche Iroegbu ended up on the front cover of the Insight News during the announcement of Derek Chauvin’s guilty sentence (McFarlane, 2021). Community members have stood for one another in amazing ways, and I am just happy to contribute and be part of the movement for Black liberation.

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### **CONCLUSION**

I end my text in a similar fashion to how it began, declaring that everyone has a place in movement work. Whether it is standing on the front line of a protest or signing a policy in place that provides opportunity and access. All actions in the name of the Black liberation movement are part of a bigger story. Artists and designers get the unique opportunity to help tell that story in ways that invoke change and inspire action. In a 1961 conversation between James Baldwin and Studs Terkel, Baldwin states that artists “are here to disturb the peace” (1961). For me, this is a call to action. A pull on my responsibility as an artist, illustrator, and freedom fighter. Even as I type this, there are continued actions happening here in Minneapolis and I plan to show up — using my creativity, networks, and resources to support a collective future where Black people are freed from state violence and can live holistically liberated lives. **D**

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