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STANFORD, CA - Affiliates of the Symbolic Systems Program at Stanford University have chosen the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter as the Symbol of the Year from 2015, in their fourth annual vote for notable symbols.

The citation for the Symbol of the Year said: "Black Lives Matter continued to be a major force in U.S. politics in 2015. A Notable Symbol selection in 2014 as well, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, for which the movement was named, had emerged in 2013 after a "not guilty" verdict in the death of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin. Both the symbol and movement showed their enduring power in 2015."

The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag began 2015 by being named 2014's Word of the Year by the American Dialect Society, the "first time a Twitter hashtag was selected by the society as its overall winner." The phrase and hashtag continued to reverberate around the U.S. and beyond throughout the year, at protests following the killing of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, following decisions not to prosecute officers for the deaths of Sandra Bland and Tamir Rice, and at 2016 Presidential campaign rallies, to name just a few. "Black Lives Matter and its associated hashtag have encapsulated, over a sustained period, organized resistance and challenge to a range of injustices that affect black people in the U.S. and globally," said the Symbolic Systems Program's Associate Director Todd Davies. "It took what many saw as distinct phenomena and grouped them together in a powerfully compelling way. BLM is not only the most successful and long-lived example of hashtag activism, which is a particular interest of ours due to our focus on symbols, but is significant in the history of social and civil rights movements generally." The selection of #BlackLivesMatter in 2015 followed 2014's "hands up" gesture as the Symbolic Systems Program's second consecutive Symbol of the Year representing the new civil rights movement.
Other Notable Symbols from 2015 chosen by voters for their significance were:

- **the "Peace for Paris" symbol**: In November of 2015, following terrorist attacks in Paris, French graphic designer Jean Jullien fashioned the Eiffel Tower into a variation of the peace symbol. The "Peace for Paris" emblem went viral, symbolizing solidarity with France and a desire for peace worldwide.

- **"Je suis Charlie"**: French art director Joachim Roncin created the slogan and logo "Je suis Charlie" (French for "I am Charlie") in January following a massacre at the offices of the French satirical weekly newspaper Charlie Hebdo. In the weeks after the killings, it became a symbol of free speech and of solidarity with writers and satirists.

- **the death of Alan Kurdi**: Alan Kurdi was a 3 year old Syrian refugee of Kurdish ethnic background who drowned on September 2nd in the Mediterranean. Photographs of his lifeless body taken by Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir symbolized the moral dimension of the refugee crisis, sparking a surge in donations and, at least temporarily, greater willingness to accept migrants.

- **the removal of the Confederate flag**: Despite her immediate arrest, Bree Newsome's removal of the Confederate flag at the South Carolina State House on June 27 was followed by an official vote to remove the flag on July 9. Her action occurred after a massacre of black churchgoers focused attention on the flag and its meanings. For many, its removal symbolized a repudiation of racism.

- **the flag of ISIS (the "Islamic State")**: This flag was chosen by affiliates for the second year in a row as a Notable Symbol, based the power of ISIS, or the "Islamic State," to attract adherents. The flag now evokes fear all over the world. ISIS attacks spread far beyond Iraq and Syria in 2015, and followers were implicated in political violence in France and the United States.

- **boats full of Syrian refugees**: The Syrian conflict and Syrian refugees were major news topics for most of 2015. The overcrowded and dangerous boats that carried refugees across the Aegean were symbols of the refugees' desperation as well as the growing sense of crisis in Europe attached to their migration.

- **the immigration sign**: The immigration sign was one of 50 symbol signs produced in the 1970s through a collaboration between the professional design association AIGA and the U.S. Department of Transportation. Seen at points of entry in many countries, for refugees and other migrants the symbol represents the barriers of border control and immigration policies.

- **emoji**: From the Face with Tears of Joy -- chosen by Oxford Dictionaries as its 2015 Word of the Year -- to whimsical pictograms like the Pile of Poo, emoji characters grew substantially in popularity in 2015 as native support for them became available on more users' platforms.

- **the swipe**: Swiping became an important control gesture in apps such as
Tinder, and grew in popularity in 2015. App swiping builds directional associations in our minds: e.g., right for like, left for dislike, and has made tasks such as meeting people feel more like a game.

The ten recognized symbols were chosen from 20 nominations submitted between December 18th and 24th, with voting taking place December 26th through January 1st. Nominations appeared on the ballot in the words of the nominators. Selection indicated only that the symbol had been significant during the year, rather than an endorsement of any point of view associated with it. One hundred and fifteen alumni/ae, students, faculty, and staff affiliated with the Program cast ballots in a system in which each voter could vote for any nominated symbol as Symbol of the Year, Other Notable Symbol, or neither.

All of the program's alums, current students, and faculty/staff were eligible to vote. The ballot stated that the purpose of the vote was "to recognize the important role that symbols play in our world" ("as affiliates of the Symbolic Systems Program").

The idea for a "Symbol of the Year" was inspired by the many annual "of the year" designations and awards that are put out by various organizations, especially the American Dialect Society's annual "Word of the Year" vote. Stanford's Symbolic Systems Program focuses on human and computational systems that use symbols to communicate and to represent information.

For "Criteria", the ballot stated the following:

"The Symbol of the Year need not be new to this year, but should have achieved widespread cultural importance during the year. A symbol is both used and understood to represent a concept, object, location, event, or linguistic unit. Types of symbols include the following:

- a flag or emblem (e.g. the Olympic flag, the red AIDS awareness ribbon)
- a grapheme, written character, or glyph (e.g. the '+' sign, the lowercase 'e', the Helvetica 'A')
- a hand signal or gesture (e.g. the 'A-OK' sign, the salute)
- an iconic object or animal (e.g. the Statue of Liberty, the black cat)
- an ideogram (e.g. the peace symbol, the caduceus symbol of commerce)
- a logo (e.g. the Red Cross logo, the MTV logo)
- a pictogram (e.g. the International Symbol of Access, the Universal Recycling Symbol)
- a screen icon (e.g. the magnifying glass/search icon, the trash icon)
- an auditory symbol or acoustic signal (e.g. the train whistle, the Intel bongs, the SOS prosign)
- a tactile symbol (e.g. a braille character, a TSBVI Standard Tactile Symbol)
- a symbolic action or event (e.g. the lighting of a candle, the sun setting)
- an iconic photograph or image (e.g. the Migrant Mother, the Guerrillero Heroico)
• a posted sign or signal (e.g. an exit sign, a red light)
• an abbreviation (e.g. 'lbs.', 'USA')
• an iconic person or group (e.g. the Virgin Mary, the Freedom Riders)
• a name or nickname (e.g. 'Betty Crocker', 'Joe the Plumber')
• a word or phrase (e.g. 'email', 'Win one for the Gipper!')
• a mascot or imaginary character (e.g. Ronald McDonald, Yogi Bear)

"Lots of things can be symbols," said the program's Associate Director, Todd Davies, after the first Symbol of the Year vote three years ago, "but relatively few things actually are. Being a symbol is an acquired status, that gets established through use. Symbols can obviously become notable because the things they represent are notable. But we wanted to draw attention to the significance that symbols themselves have, as symbols, beyond what they represent, and to get ourselves and others thinking about the role they play in contemporary life."

Previous Symbols of the Year were the percent sign ("%") in 2012, the equal sign ("=") in 2013, and the hands up gesture in 2014.

The photo above shows a protest sign that reads "#BLACKLIVESMATTER". from https://www.flickr.com/photos/82417691@N00/16022084905, License: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/