Navigating a BIPOC Identity Through Solidarity Design Labor

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This short paper uses experiences as a design practitioner, an activist, and a 2nd generation immigrant as a means to understand and define “good work”, and how that work can assist in navigating one’s identity. The “good work” is self-defined by the author as labor produced in solidarity with communities in need of support. Through the obsession with work, albeit “good work”, one can ultimately lose sight of their own identity through assimilation. Or at the very least, be forced into a work-first lifestyle where constant code-switching is necessary, which forces the siloing off of each identity lens, never to see the collective identities represented and experienced in full.

The intent of sharing these lensed histories, lived experiences, and struggles of compromising identities are to offer an alternative pathway moving forward. This pathway would recognize and embrace one’s plural identity earlier in a career, seeing it as an asset rather than a deficit. Suggesting that if said mindset were to be adopted and practiced amongst BIPOC, specifically Asian American designers, greater solidarity work and movements could arise with the intent of dismantling the systems of oppressive power, explicitly white supremacy and capitalism.

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About the Author:
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Pabellon most recently was an Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at Dominican University and prior to that held the role of senior designer at the award-winning studio Faust Associates. In addition to his professional and academic practice Pabellon also serves as the Co-President for AIGA Chicago, is a roster member of Dark Matter University, and is a Core Organizer of the Design As Protest Collective.
This paper uses multiple lenses of connected experiences and research in those perspectives to define “good work”.

The first mode, serving as a design practitioner and educator, with a focus on branding, digital/web design, and long form publication.
The second view, as an activist/organizer, primarily working in community-based arts and design justice.
The third perspective comes from the view as a 2nd generation Asian-American immigrant of Filipino decent, whose family moved to the states during the influx of the immigration boom of the ’60s and ’70s.

These hands are not mine, but rather serve as a reenactment of how my mom would read my, and my siblings, hands during lull moments in the day.
For me, starting my career as a designer, “good design” (not to be confused with design-for-good [AIGA] or Dieter Ram’s definition) was associated with winning awards from professional organizations, clubs, or associations. Which usually translated to measured monetary gains for the designer and/or the client.

Today, that metric might be replaced by the amount of likes, comments, or followers one might have.

This was primarily my bread and butter, pay the bills, 9-to-5, professional work.
As an activist, the “good work” was always about social justice that was driven by a moral and ethical compass that directed my participation in organizations and collectives. The effort/intention was, and still is, to create action, which in turn would manifest into societal change.

This was my work after-hours of the design studio, usually.
And as a son of Asian immigrants “good work” looked like sacrificing one’s self, mostly at the expense of assimilation, to provide for your family and community to keep them and future generations financially and physically safe.

This identity was mostly seen in family events and holidays when professional design and activist work would allow me to participate/attend.
These different hands and the way they are positioned have their own semiotics and each represent a lens, and each lens has a spectrum. These spectrums are wide which makes it difficult to feel confident in who you really are.
Early in my career, I would openly seek successful Filipino graphic designers and share their stories and work with my family to justify my career and academic choices. I'm still not sure if my parents knew/now what I do for a living.

Lucille Tenazas and Patrick Castro, directly and indirectly formed my practice and outlook of graphic design as a Filipino practicing in the Bay Area.
Design and activism, seemed like a pipe dream to me.

I was happy to learn about Tibor Kalman and Sister Corita Kent’s legacy. They were also influential to me, their use of the graphic design to advocate for Social Justice and tolerance was inspiring.

However, the idea of designing for activism, while getting paid, seemed like a privilege that was not available to many brown, yellow, and black designers trying to break into the predominantly white industry.
Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs were my initial reference points of Asian-American activists that worked in solidarity with other populations of color.

(Collage of a woman in glasses looking up on the left and a woman looking to the left on the right, overlapped on the two images are two overlapping circles. Inset in the collage are the hands described in slide 02 and 03 cropped into circular shapes, overlapping.)
Later I would be exposed to and learn about Filipino activists such as Larry Itliong and Emil de Guzman, names never shared with me in classrooms or in my household growing up.
The intent of sharing these lensed histories, lived experiences, and struggles of compromising identities is to offer an alternative pathway moving forward. This pathway would recognize and embrace one’s plural identity earlier in a career, seeing it as an asset rather than a deficit. If said mindset were to be adopted and practiced amongst BIPOC, specifically Asian Americans, greater solidarity work and movements could arise with the intent of dismantling the systems of oppressive power, explicitly white supremacy and capitalism.